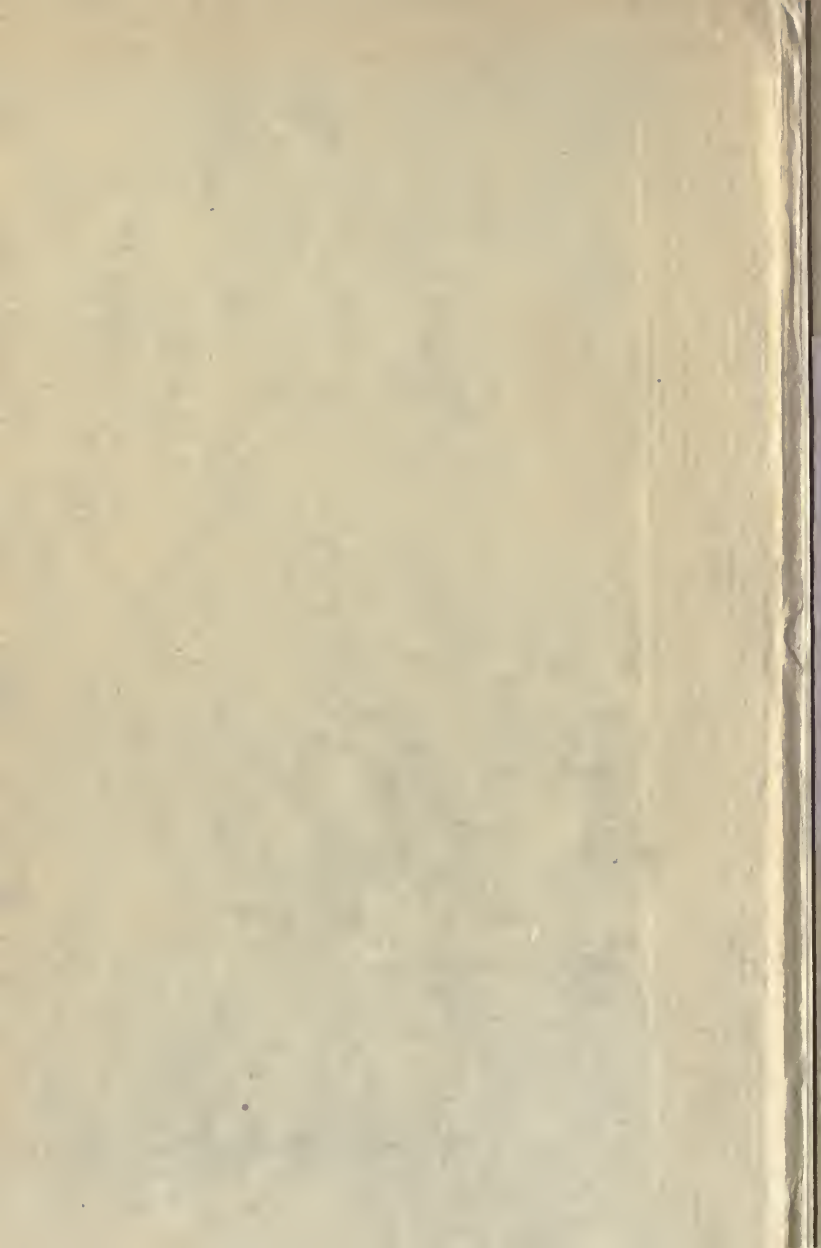


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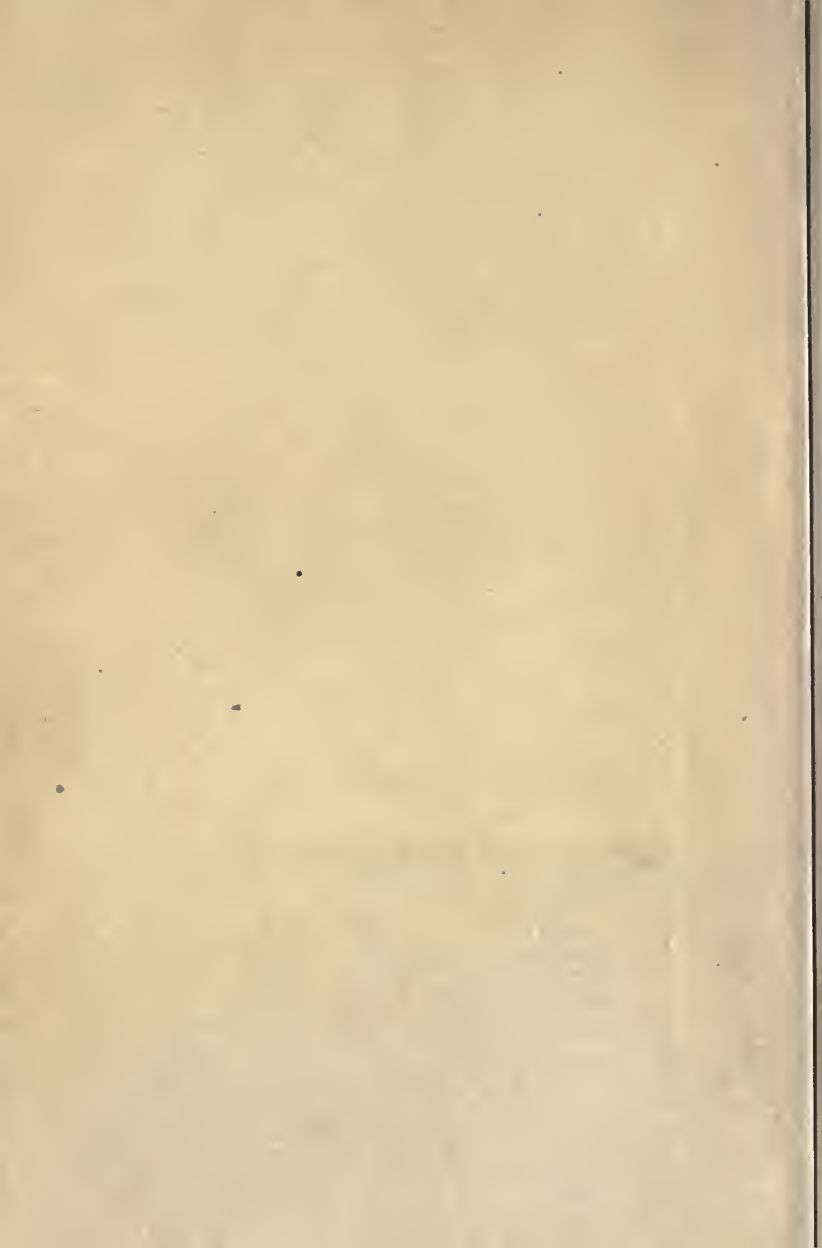


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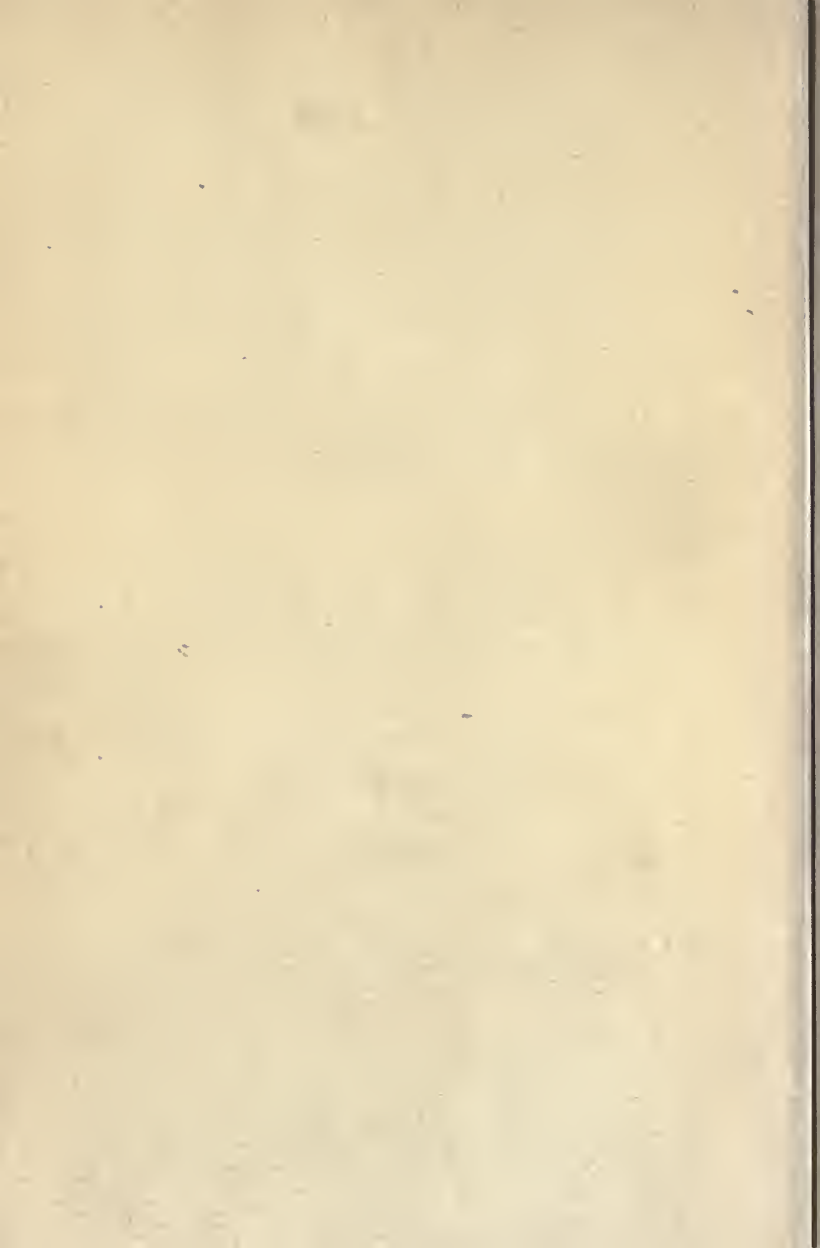
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SIR PATRICK: THE PUDDOCK

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF "MR. SMITH," "THE ARCHDEACON," ETC., ETC.



TORONTO

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CHAPTER I

"I HATE UGLY MEN"

"I DON'T care if he is 'Sir Patrick'—or 'Lord Patrick' or 'Duke Patrick.' He's just 'The Puddock,' and every one calls him so. I hate ugly men."

Mrs. Jonathan Mercer looked at her young visitor. "You do?" said she, drily.

"I do. Of course I do. Every one does."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Mercer, still more drily. She would have liked to shake the girl. As any one would. It is almost certain that any twelve impartial jurymen adjudicating upon the scene, would have given it as their unanimous verdict that Miss Sophia Gill deserved a shaking, if nothing more.

She to hate ugly men! There was something pathetically ludicrous in the idea, if there had

not been something else,—but to tell the truth, this something else stood between the older lady and any sense of humour: her kindly nature was as much roused to ire as it was possible for it to be.

“’Pon my word!” cried she, to herself. Then with deepened emphasis: “’Pon my word!”

If only she could have spoken out,—but how is it possible to tell a young girl to her face that it ill becomes her to set such store by personal appearance, when ever so slight an accentuation of the pronoun conveys an intimation not to be misinterpreted? She could not do it; of course she could not do it: both as friend, hostess, and a human fellow-creature her tongue was tied, though flushed cheeks and compressed lips betrayed fast and furious utterances within.

“Hates ugly men, does she? And what if they return the compliment? Two can play at that game. . . . Ugly men? What about ugly women? And I that thought poor plain Sophy Gill would be thankful of anybody, and was ready to jump out of my skin when it seemed as if Sir Patrick were going to take to her! Little did I dream—I thought it would be only kind to give her the hint. Hates ugly men? And pray who is she

to pick and choose? I suppose she thinks she has the world at her feet!"—drumming with heavily-ringed fingers on the table.

She was by far the more excited of the two. Indeed, after the first outbreak, delivered more pettishly than passionately, Miss Sophy cooled down; and remembering something she had to do upstairs, presently left the room without any attempt to renew the conversation.

Mrs. Mercer's eyes followed her, and now her lips were partially unsealed; so that though she did not actually speak aloud, her wrathful ruminations found vent in broken murmurs and ejaculations.

"There she goes! A bounce and a bang. No style, no figure. Can't even walk well. Lolls at the dinner table. Crosses her legs whenever she gets the chance. I've had to speak to her about all these things; and poor girl," relenting somewhat, "she has tried to do better. And she did take it well; I must say that for her. She was improving every day. But who would ever have dreamed of her not seeing that at the best she's only a bouncing, good-natured girl? And men don't marry as they used to do. And even if they are on the look-out for a wife,

Sophy has nothing to—she's not likely to be picked out. Hates ugly men, indeed!"

It was an unfortunate phrase; one more unfortunate could hardly have been selected. Mrs. Mercer had been a beauty in her youth, and swains by the score had sighed at her feet; but she felt that *she* would never have given utterance to such an assertion, even before she accepted honest Jonathan, whom perhaps she might not have thought about had he not been what he was, but with whom she had lived very happily for well nigh fifty years.

"If I could do it!" thought she now, drawing up her long neck; "and a better husband no woman ever had. Miss Sophy Gill would have turned up her nose at him, I daresay;" again a lambent flame lit up the fine old eyes, and they wandered involuntarily towards an opposite mirror, fastening their gaze slowly and piercingly upon themselves. Their owner was thinking of a pair of colourless orbs, full, and slightly protruding: "the Gill eyes," she was wont to call them.

"Whom does she expect to get, I wonder?"

A pause, and then: "I wonder if it was a mistake to bring Sophy?" cogitated her patroness,

slowing down as it were. "If it has put ideas into her head, I shall never forgive myself. She seemed humble enough, and modest enough, when she first came. This big place, and our treating her just as if she were our own daughter, may have turned her head? And yet I can't say I should have thought so. Even people who asked about her, and saw her settled here as if it were her home—as it is, for the time—all thought it a good idea. Comfortable for us, and a great thing for Sophy. She has been as useful, and handy, and obliging as possible. Always cheerful and pleasant, too. Always ready to do whatever was wanted; never a sour look have I had till to-day. Even to-day she only said what was in her mind, I suppose. She did not say it to annoy me. But, mercy on us, that it should have been in her mind! That's what I can't get over. The—the impudence of it. Poor Sophy!"

Poor Sophy! The deep-seated, ingrained contempt of the last words would have pierced the thickest skin; and with all her benevolence, and all her indulgence, it expressed to a hair's breadth the real state of Mrs. Mercer's feelings towards her young *protégée*.

She would do everything for the girl—but she thought nothing of her. She had the utmost goodwill, it was almost tantamount to affection for “the poor thing,”—but she never saw Sophy in a new hat or frock, never heard her strumming on the piano, nor witnessed her attempts at dancing a reel without mentally ejaculating ‘The poor thing!’

Sophy, *au naturel*, would indeed pass muster without remark. Mrs. Mercer, to do her justice, was never on the lookout for shortcomings; but it was when, with the spirits of youth, the big, floundering girl threw herself into whatever was going on, and rollicked unconscious of any belittling eyes, that the old lady would mutter to herself.

And she had been wont to think it rather touching and very nice of Sophy to be so unconscious. “She is just as happy as if she were the greatest beauty of the land,” she would say; taking it for granted that it was not ignorance of but submission to recognised inferiority which induced the happiness.

“Well, well, well!”

We must now leave the perplexed, and disappointed, not to say disgusted, dame to her

musings, and go back a few weeks, in order that our readers may understand the situation.

Mr. Jonathan Mercer was perhaps not quite a millionaire, but he was generally thought and called one. He was at all events a very rich man, and could afford to live anywhere and everywhere on a very large scale.

For some years past he had been building a palace in the West Highlands of Scotland, and it had only been completed a few months before our story opens. Previous to that he had rented houses with moors attached, during the months when moors are in fashion. Such at least was the remark of one derisive sportsman, who would have preferred, naturally, his host's renting moors with house, hut, or any sort of roofed habitation thrown in.

This, however, would not have suited our friend. He liked comfort, as did his wife. The couple were childless, and found resource in luxurious surroundings, which had become through long experience a necessity. Accordingly they had "gone in for big houses, and let the moor rip"—according to Jack Marksman.

And still the big houses were not what they

should have been; they were inconvenient, ill-lighted, even dilapidated—as houses rented by millionaires are sure to be. The billiard-room would be shockingly small; the smoking-room draughty; the servants' hall a constant bone of contention. “*We* don't mind, it's the poor servants;” Mrs. Mercer would continually affirm, being a slave, of course, to her fat butler and dyspeptic housekeeper.

And there was always the worry of being at a distance from butcher and grocer, and the endless sending to and fro when trains and steamboats had to be met. “One would think they tried to find the furthest place they could from anything and anybody, and then build upon it!”—cried the poor distracted woman at last, while Jonathan nodded assent.

The post was his grievance. He could never get a second post without sending for it; often he could not get it at all.

And at length they could stand it no longer, and the thought arose: Why not build for themselves?

“And then we can make it comfortable, Jonathan.”

“It can at least be water-tight,” said he.

There had been a drip in the passage at his last place.

"Do let us be near the village, Jonathan."

"Aye, aye! and the post-office."

"And the church."

"And the station. But no," said Jonathan, suddenly, "we'll not bother about stations. We'll build by the water side, and have our own yacht—a steam yacht—and go and come when we like."

In a single afternoon the two had planned it all, and only wondered what they had been about not to have done so before. To think that they had put up with so much, and for so long!—but now, Losca Castle was the result.

Losca Castle on Glen Losca bay, in one of the most beautiful of the Hebridean islands, was in its way a great achievement. It combined magnificence of size with elegance of structure and luxury of equipment,—furthermore it was just off the high road, and within ten minutes' walk of the stone pier. On this latter point Mr. Mercer had made a concession to domestic exigencies; his steam yacht could not always be requisitioned when household matters were concerned; and as he was building, and could choose

his own site, having bought the entire estate, it was represented to him that he might as well as not reap the benefit of daily steamers, and also have the amusement of seeing them load and unload from his windows.

He bargained for a telescope, and did as he was bid.

And though the brand new erection was perhaps rather too much *en évidence* for the taste of old-fashioned people, there was no denying that it was architecturally a success. Its owner had kept his own ideas and tastes in the background; he was not going to 'keep a dog and bark himself;' he said: he had inquired round, and found the best man to go to; then turned him loose with open purse-strings. It was a very wise thing to do.

"For all we want is a good, solid, comfortable 'ouse," quoth our worthy—then corrected himself hastily: "but mind, it's a castle."

For several reasons he wished it to be a castle; but the most potent of these was a secret conviction that without being able to help himself he would say 'Ouse' every time the word came up.

Accordingly the turrets of Losca Castle rose

broad and high, and there was no mistaking that they were turrets. Even when reflected in the waters of the bay, as these lay glassy and shining beneath, their battlements were sharply defined; and the entrance gates, visible far up the Sound, carried out the idea.

Within all was breadth, and space, and height. "None of your nasty low ceilings for me. Can't breathe in 'em," said Jonathan, expanding his chest. "And mind you, let there be plenty of everything"—and those were the only orders he gave.

He did not even remain upon the spot, but went and came, and nodded his approbation, at long intervals.

Masons and carpenters, plumbers and painters winked at each other, as the stout little figure turned its back after having stood silently among them, while 'the boss' pointed hither and thither, —and when their work was finished they collected their tools and went off reluctantly, for the old man had let it be understood that he was satisfied after a substantial and satisfactory fashion.

"It's all right;" was pretty much the sum total of his praise, however; and the young man to whose credit Losca Castle now stands, was in

consequence startled beyond measure when with a sudden jingling of keys in his right-hand pocket—it is presumed they were keys that jingled; something always did when Mr. Mercer was about to plunge—the millionaire turned sharply towards him, “Look here, will you finish the job?”

“But—hum, ha”—the young architect rubbed his head in perplexity. He thought the job was finished. Was there anything wrong? Any alteration——?

“No, no: that’s not it. No, no; not at all. You have built me a good ’ouse, a capital ’ouse,” said Jonathan, heartily. “It’s just right,—and with me ‘just right’ *means* just right. I’ll never pick an ’ole afterwards. What I want now is to know”—he paused, and cocked his eye; then with a sudden blurt, “will ye furnish it?”

“Oh, never mind being surprised,” continued he, with a laugh and a nod. “It mayn’t be the regulation way of doing things, but what’s that to us? We know nuthin’ about such things, my wife and I. You do. You have built me a splendid ’ouse, and what you have got to do now is to put in the sticks. I’ll make it wuth your while. D’ye see?”

Whereat Mr. Alma Tadema Jones saw, to the mutual advantage of Losca Castle and himself.

It may be taken for granted then, that everything within and without the domain was of the best, and that it was by far the finest abode Miss Sophia Gill had ever set foot in, or indeed seen the outside of, when, all curiosity and delight, she sprang from room to room, and upstairs and downstairs, on her arrival there.

Heretofore her ideas of Scotland had been of the vaguest. The Gill family, none of whom had ever crossed the Border, had indeed told their friends with exultation of Sophy's luck in going thither, and her father with a reminiscence of Oxford days and friends who occasionally shot and fished on Highland moors and rivers, had warned his daughter she would have to 'rough it'—but for this he had been corrected briskly by his wife: "As if the Mercers ever roughed it!" Sophy, between her knowledge of the Mercers, and her ignorance of everything else, must have had conflicting and peculiar anticipations.

But nothing came amiss to her; nothing ever came amiss to the Gills in the shape of an invitation; and its reception in the small, over-stocked

parsonage, was all that the heart of Benevolence itself could desire.

Previously, Mrs. Mercer had made the proposition to her husband in these terms:

“Jonathan, those poor Gills.”

“Well?” said he.

“I don’t know what is to be done for them.”

“You seem to do it without knowing, then.”

“But Jonathan”—a pause.

“What is in your mind now?” said he.

At last it all came out. She had been over to see the Gills—who were generally spoken of as ‘the poor Gills’—that afternoon. She had found the small, hot, stuffy house even fuller than usual; for not only had the boys been sent home from school a week before the holidays, owing to an outbreak of some complaint, but they had actually brought with them a belated schoolfellow, who had nowhere else to go,—and the already overburdened mother, with a patient smile, had refused to see any hardship in this addition to her cares. “They’re so happy to be at home, and it is nice, fine weather,” said she, cheerfully.

“But where in the world do you put them all?” demanded Mrs. Mercer, who kind as she was,

would say anything she chose to 'the poor Gills.'

When she had heard all, and taken her leave, she pondered deeply on her way home. There was she sitting alone in her big carriage, and going back to her big house, where only her husband would sit with her all the evening.

The couple were sociable and hospitable, but they loved to be alone between whiles; and it was this predilection for intervals of absolute rest and freedom, which made her pause before committing herself to the venture which yet she could not dismiss from her thoughts.

"You see it's Sophy?" she murmured, interrogatively.

"Sophy? What about Sophy?"

"I can't make up my mind to do it, and yet I can't make up my mind *not* to do it. To take her with us to Losca, I mean. You see we have never taken a girl in that way before. They have come and visited us; come for a week or two, and then gone on to some other place; but if we take a Gill girl—of course it must be Sophy, for none of the others are old enough, besides it would be a shame to pass Sophy by, even if Ethel is better looking—what I was saying is that if we take a

girl of that sort she must stay with us the whole time ;” emphatically. “ She must go with us and come with us. And three months is three months. Sophy would have to be quite intimate ; and of course ever afterwards she would have to go on being intimate. One has to take that into consideration. You can’t break off when you’ve once begun. What do you think ? ”

“ Oh, I think—take her.”

“ That’s so like you, Jonathan ; ” drawing back on the instant ; “ men are always so off-hand and airy ;—and I daresay you are laughing at me in your sleeve, and wondering what on earth I am making a fuss about ? ”

It was precisely what Jonathan was doing.

“ I daresay now you are saying to yourself that it would be a fine thing for Sophy, and for me too.”

“ I was, old lady—I was.”

“ But it’s not a fine thing at all ; ” with asperity.

“ Is it not ? ”

“ She’d be dreadfully in the way, sometimes. And I’m not so old but I can still do my own business in the house, and need help from nobody. And suppose she were taken sick ? Or, wanted to go home ? Or—— ? ”

"Trust her not to do *that*, at all events;" Jonathan smiled significantly. "Miss Sophy will know a good billet when she finds it. And as for her turning sick, a great healthy creature like that is never sick. Give her enough to eat and drink, and she'd thrive in a cellar. You take Sophy."

"It does seem rather a shame not to take her;" relenting.

"And get her some frocks. She'll need frocks and things."

"She's a sensible, good-humoured girl, Jonathan; and so safely plain that there would be no trouble with the young men——"

"Ain't you going to pick her up a husband then?"

All at once Mrs. Mercer's countenance brightened. Oddly enough that idea had not before occurred to her. From having neither sons, nor daughters, nor any young relation whose matrimonial concerns could be presided over, she had almost grown to forget that such things existed, and that summer and winter, seed time and harvest did not roll round and round with the same easy, unexpectant monotony for every one as they did for her and Jonathan.

But to be sure, although she was never allowed a say in Mary Harborborough's affairs, nor even to have Mary by herself on a visit—an old rankle—because forsooth the company beneath Mary's own uncle's roof was supposed not to be good enough for Lady Harborborough's daughter, she might make up a match for poor Sophy Gill and welcome. Sophy's parents would bless her. The girl herself—why, it might be the chance of her life!

The very next day Mrs. Mercer drove over to the parsonage and popped a cheque into Sophy's hands.

“For of course Scotland requires different sort of clothes,” said she, cheerfully. “You just tell your mother that; and ask her to excuse my taking the liberty. You must have dressy things, and rough things. And a good macintosh and umbrella. Oh, and Sophy, don't forget stout boots; boots that will stand knocking about. But, my dear, you must be quite smart sometimes. On Sundays. And in the evenings. You will need a couple of evening dresses at the least—and a blouse to put on when we're by ourselves——”

“Dear Mrs. Mercer, how awfully, awfully good

you are!" Sophy's eyes were starting from her head. Nothing like this had ever happened in her life before.

"I'm very glad to do it, my dear." The old lady's heart warmed as she spoke. "Very glad indeed, I assure you. I hope we shall be very happy together."

"Happy!" cried Sophy, in an ecstasy.

"I'll get her a husband, I declare I will." Mrs. Mercer subsequently vowed the above a dozen times; but still no one presented himself at Losca Castle who appeared in the least disposed to assume the title; and now, now that Sir Patrick Kinellan—but Sir Patrick must not be thus hustled in, neck and crop, at the end of a chapter.

CHAPTER II

PLAYFUL SELINA

SIR PATRICK was a curious, old-fashioned creature, whose ideas about himself were forever at variance; but both his shyness and his pride, his diffidence and his dignity would have shrunk appalled before the idea of his forming the subject of discussion, matrimonially, among his new-found neighbours.

For so long had he lived his own life, by so many had his bachelorhood been taken for granted, and his reticence upon the subject respected, that at forty years of age he felt himself as safe from attacks, expectations, or even jests as though he had been a hundred.

Time was when the homely-featured, unattractive boy keenly felt and bitterly resented the contrast between himself and his younger brother, as handsome and gallant a lad as any one would

wish to see,—but now he never envied Nigel. Within his own walls he had peace and comfort ; and told himself that he would not exchange his solitude, and the serenity of his congenial, secluded life, for the outwardly far more prosperous and successful career of the dashing soldier, cankered as it was by secret misery.

Nigel had married a pretty and wealthy girl—a marriage approved by every one—and only one person knew, knew at least to its fullest extent, how that marriage had turned out. Domestic bliss is not the world's concern ; no one supposed that Colonel and Mrs. Kinellan were a devoted couple,—but then what did it matter? They were rich enough to afford a large house, and had no need to bother with each other,—(the situation was thus disposed of once in Sir Patrick's hearing, and he had never forgotten it).

Had he been handsome, blythe, and taking as Nigel, with the good luck to wed an heiress as charming as himself, would that have been the end of it with him, too, he wondered?

Nigel had brought his bride to the old Highland home, when he was as much in love with her as it was in his nature to be ; and Sir Patrick, who read his Shakespeare, and often had a mental

quotation to suit a passing moment, turned away more than once from the sight of the honeymooners philandering up the glen, or by the lake ; turned away murmuring : “ But oh, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man’s eyes.”

Subsequently it took him a long time to believe in the possibility of what every one else knew to be an accomplished fact. Rumour never reached him, and he had only his own eyes and ears and observation to depend upon.

But alas ! they were not to be misdoubted ; and once disillusion set in, there was no more jealousy, only a profound and tender pity for the husband, and a burning contempt for the wife.

As was natural also, all Sir Patrick’s views of life on its domestic side were coloured by this unfortunate experience. Here was Nigel, he argued, a man whom any woman might love, and who had certainly been once beloved—for had he not himself been a witness to the endearments, the blandishments ?—and Nigel was all that he ever had been, nay, he was a better fellow, a kinder, gentler fellow, infinitely less selfish and masterful than in the old days—yet the love, where was it ?

It amazed the elder brother who had such a deep-seated, pathetic admiration for everything the other said and did, to hear his opinion either jeered at, or ignored as of too little value to be worth even a scoff. It wounded him to his inmost soul to see the growing indifference with which such contempt was met.

At one time Nigel would have coloured and bit his lips, or flashed out resentment—which after all, was better than apathy, the result of a long growth of shame,—but Sir Patrick knew that now he need fear none of the bickerings which had shocked and startled him in earlier years.

There was one child of the marriage, a little girl; and for Christabel's sake (so she said), the mother, who never found out that she was no favourite with her brother-in-law, would every now and then consent to spend a few weeks at Kinellan House, little suspecting it was mainly for Christabel's sake she was tolerated there.

She thought she brought life, and gaiety, and a breath of the great world to the gloomy mansion buried in its dismal glen. She vowed the first sight of it gave her the blues. She told her friends it always rained there—*always*. She said

Sir Patrick rattled in it like a pea in a pod—with other small pleasantries.

But when Colonel Kinellan suggested curtly that there was no occasion for his wife to put herself out, as he was not aware that any invitation had come to her from his brother, she wondered what on earth the man would say next? No invitation, indeed! As if she needed an invitation! As if poor dear Sir Patrick would ever have the 'cheek' to ask her! Of course it was for her to offer—"And for Chrissy's sake I shall offer," concluded Madam, with a toss of her head.

Presently she would add "Are you coming with us?"

She wished him to go, and he always went,—but he had his reason and she hers. He could at least stand between his poor old Pat and anything he knew Pat would particularly dislike, but which singlehanded a host might be unable to prevent;—also he looked forward to twilight talks, and smokes, and wanderings about the moorland and the shore, when he could once more feel himself something of the Nigel of by-gone days,—while she with all her affected aversion to the spot, in reality cast upon it the eye of future possession.

In the long absences of the brothers, when not a sound woke the echoes of the lonely house, she could pry at will into its recesses, measure the gallery for a dance, apportion the rooms for gay guests and endless house parties; re-furnish one particular turret-chamber which even in its present condition foreshadowed a charming boudoir for herself.

Furthermore, she appraised the pictures, the china, the old cabinets and bureaux. She might keep them, or she might not. Anyhow they were of value.

There were diamonds, too, and lace; that she knew. But she could not get at them; and certainly would never get at them if she did not ingratiate herself with their possessor. Funny old man, what on earth did he want with lace and diamonds? He ought to have given them to her ages ago. Still, of course, the poor old thing thought he might marry,—and the wonder was that he had not married. If he only knew his worth; knew that there were girls by the dozen who would jump at him, old and ugly as he was, for the sake of being Lady Kinellan; he would be run in—horrible to think of!—before he knew where he was.

And how she would have hated a Lady Kinellan; and how odious it would have been to have seen her swaggering through the London season, and then inviting all the people to Kinellan for the Highland season!

As it was, Selina did the part of understudy, and bided her time.

Sir Patrick was six years his brother's senior, and with his old coats, and old-mannish ways and habits, was certainly in effect much more. She easily persuaded herself that one of these days he would drop off quietly, and then hey! for a good time, and no more locked drawers. What a rummage she would have!

"He's such a dear little old man," she would say confidentially in her own set; (for curiously enough, she did not at all dislike the man who kept her out of so much, and who, had she known it, shrank from her with such an unconquerable aversion)—"he's a perfect little fright, you know; but quite a darling. Lets me do whatever I like; and I daresay would be thankful to have me there all the year round. Chris is simply spoilt when she goes to Kinellan. Of course it will all be hers one day;" carelessly.

Nigel was rarely mentioned, never taken into

account by his wife. The most significant reference to him on the part of the elder brother would be not only unheeded, but absolutely unperceived,—since she had settled it with herself that only jealousy and dislike could exist within the bosom of one so inferior both mentally and physically, (Nigel had outstripped his brother in every scholastic competition);—and having moreover learned that nothing had been wanting to excite such a feeling on the part of parents whose pride had been mortified in their heir, and who had in consequence lavished all their affection on their only other child, nothing more was needed.

“ Really, you know, I believe no one cares for poor Patrick except me,” Selina in a fit of virtue would protest. “ Of course Nigel is *by way of*; ” contemptuously. “ But when we first married, I remember he told me to be prepared for a little squat, dark, wild-looking man, who hardly ever spoke, and spent the whole day out of doors. If I remind him of that now, he flies out in a passion—but he said it all the same. And when the two are together, my dears, such a contrast ! ” All the arching of two practised eyebrows could not sufficiently convey the contrast.

Though she no longer cared twopence for the

handsome Guardsman who had won her fickle affections ten years before, Selina did not behind his back deny Nigel's looks. "Only he's such a bore;" she would fan herself, yawning. Once she added, "I declare, I believe I should have done better with Patrick."

The thing that pleased her most about her brother-in-law was his persistent clinging to the home of his childhood. "It is so nice and dear of him. Of course he is happier there; he would make nothing of society,"—(this was for an audience, we know her private opinion)—"but it is only one man in a thousand who would have the sense to see it. When Sir Patrick goes to London, he spends his time at the different 'sights!' Fancy! The 'sights,' you know! I believe he does them regularly; goes up the Great Wheel and all the rest of it. But I must say he has one respectable taste. He attends the opera regularly. Didn't I tell you? He is desperately, ridiculously fond of music—oh, he sits and thrums by himself on the old piano at Kinellan; Chris found that out; and since then, I have made her get hold of the new tunes, and practice before we go there. Well, my dear, I do assure you, this odd creature, who likes nothing else that he ought to like, simply

lives at the opera. He is there night after night, always by himself, and always in a front seat. I wish he would have a box, and take us—me, at least, for my husband wouldn't be paid to go,—but Pat dislikes having other people with him. Oh, I believe he sits and stares at cricket matches, too,—and that is Sir Patrick Kinellan's London season! Isn't it comical? Isn't it a joke? People can't invite him, for he won't give an address, and he never goes near his club; for fear of the letters, he says. Once he didn't even tell *me* where he was staying, and I pretended to be very angry,—but of course no one can be really angry with an oddity;—and he said it was only because he knew I would wish to be hospitable, and he had come up to enjoy himself,—wasn't that amusing? Oh, we are the best of friends, and as he won't come to see me, I go to see him, which is far better."

Indeed, scarcely an autumn passed that she did not find her way to Kinellan House, before proceeding to gayer haunts; and a veritable thorn in the flesh did she prove to worthy Mr. and Mrs. Mercer on first taking up their residence at Losca Castle.

At church—for of course she went to church—

she looked at them through her eyeglass. "Good heavens! what horrors!"

She had, however, been obliged to speak to the horrors; indeed she was longing to do so in order to be rude to them—and Sir Patrick's neighbourly greeting was quite what she had been prepared for. It was delicious to look up and down Mrs. Mercer's tall, handsome, well-clad figure, and if she could not precisely call it 'vulgar,' indicate unmistakably that it was not 'smart.'

To husband and wife she would condescend; but none of their guests had any species of recognition from the female head of the Kinellan party. Sophy Gill, who was silently taking in every detail of a wonderful dress, and who stood fast by the side of her patroness, hoping for an introduction and future garden-parties, was disappointed by Selina's turning away without apparently seeing any one was there.

Sir Patrick, however, was rather cheerful on the subject. "We must ask them to dinner," said he, handing his sister-in-law into the carriage, and preparing to walk home himself.

"Oh, must we?" she said, in reality well pleased. Any variety was welcome.

"I waited till you came."

“ All right, what day ? ”

“ Well, I thought of Thursday ; we shall all be dead beat on Tuesday and Wednesday—(Tuesday was the ‘ twelfth ’)—but we shall take it easy on Thursday ; ” and he shut the carriage door.

When he got home, he added something else. “ We’ll ask them all, you know.”

“ Oh, of course,” said Selina.

And when Thursday came she put on her very smartest frock, and laughed to herself.

She governed her countenance when she found Sir Patrick rather fussy about his dinner, and careful that everything should be done in style. He was quite right ; only she would have liked him to sneer with her in private, not treat the affair as he did, with perfect seriousness and respect.

“ As we only know that there are twelve of them coming, and not any more about them, we can’t be expected to understand who should go with whom,” said he, simply ; “ I take Mrs. Mercer, and Mr. Mercer takes you ; and if there is another married woman of the party, Nigel must take her—but that can’t be decided till they appear. I have told Macleod and Scott ”—two young shooting men, who were his only other guests—

“to be ready to pick out partners for themselves, and the rest will have to manage somehow. These sort of parties can’t be formal.”

“No, certainly.” She wondered how he knew so much.

“It’s rather jolly having neighbours,” proceeded Sir Patrick. “Old Mercer seems quite unpretending and friendly. I suppose he is what you call vulgar, but I don’t mind. It has done a lot of good having that big place built. I don’t know how many poor families have not been kept going while it was building; and though I’m afraid there won’t be any more of that now that it is finished and inhabited, still there will be pickings. It is a great thing that he has not brought down his own keepers and gardeners, but given all the posts to people here; even the head gardener was our second man; and a piece of luck it was for Mackinnon; he was actually looking out to better himself, and hung on with us till Losca Castle started building. Then I said a word for him, and he got the situation in a jiffy. I supplied the head keeper, too;” with complacency.

“You take quite a fatherly interest in it all,” said the lady, pleasantly.

"Oh, I do ; I asked the men how they were getting on the other day, and they both said 'First-rate.'"

"Those millionaires always pay well."

"Hum ! No better than we do," said Sir Patrick, with a little quiet pride. "Mercer asked me what I gave, and said he should give the same."

"Dear ! He should have doubled it."

"Why should he have doubled it ?"

"Why because you are *you*," said Selina, with a laugh, "and Mr. Mercer is—Mr. Mercer. To be only Mr. Mercer's gardener—don't you see ?"

"Not at all, Losca gardens will be much more likely to become noted than ours. I fancy Mercer is fond of his garden, and will spend money upon it."

"Though he would give no higher wages ?"

"That's different ; he might not choose to out-bid me. Between ourselves, I was very well pleased that he did not ; and it is quite likely—I mean of course I don't know—but from the kind of man I take him to be, I fancy it is not unlikely that——"

"That he wants to put himself on a par with you."

This was not what Sir Patrick meant, but he saw the hopelessness of explanation. What he had divined was precisely the truth, that his homely neighbour who could not speak good English and whose excellent clothes never seemed quite at home upon his burly back, had instincts which served him in the place of knowledge, education, and fine breeding. One of these instincts told him that it could neither be agreeable to the older proprietor, nor desirable for his own dependants to have an over-flowing purse showered indiscriminately among the latter.

Donalds and Dugalds had indeed anticipated such a shower with glee, their opinions on the point coinciding with those of Mrs. Kinellan to a nicety; while their master had owned to himself that it was only too probable the amplest of expectations would be realised.

“Of course he’ll spoil them;” Sir Patrick had groaned within himself, looking with a frown at the rising turrets of the castle. But when the greedy underlings — what underlings are not greedy? — we should be so too, in their place — were surprised and disappointed, Sir Patrick was jubilant.

The millionaire’s moderation delighted him;

it did more, it turned the scale in Mr. Mercer's favour for all time.

"He's a good fellow—I'm sure he's a good fellow," quoth the baronet, stumping away home after his first interview, which had been held at the agent's house as a sort of neutral ground; (but after this the worthy Mercer called quite easily at Kinellan, and talked of other things than business)—so that by the time the great new building was inhabited, he had become fairly well known to his brother proprietor, and the good impression made at the outset was well stamped in when we find Selina and her host in conference.

It was not, however, worth arguing out with a person Sir Patrick so heartily disliked; and he had only mentioned the matter from being in a humour to talk, and to let her see that he, at least, was going to be civil to the Mercers. She might, or might not; he could not help that, and certainly would not condescend to request civility; but if he shewed his own hand, he knew her well enough to shrewdly conjecture she would follow suit on the surface—which was all he cared about.

Thus, "I fancy the wife is a cut above the husband;" observed he.

Selina turned down her lips.

"She's a remarkably handsome woman."

Selina could not deny it.

"There are no children, so——"

"Who is to get all the money?"

This Sir Patrick could not say. He had never heard of Mary Harborough.

"It is a pity there is no daughter," said Selina, playfully, "she would have been just the wife for you."

"The wife?" He looked surprised; he had hardly thought she would venture so far. "Thanks, but I don't know that I am in need of a wife."

"Oh yes, you are. Very much in need; no one more so," nodding at him.

"Indeed?"—stiffly. "But," said Sir Patrick, with an effort not to let too much of his inward annoyance appear, "if I am, why should—excuse me if I fail to see why a daughter of Mr. Mercer's should be supposed——"

"My dear man"—(he did hate being called her 'dear man')—"nothing would have been more natural. She would have been brought to your very door; you would have had no trouble; and could have managed it all down here so com-

fortably. You need never have left Kinellan; and the money would——” she looked round, “you are getting the least little bit out of date here,” she guided his eye from spot to spot—— “the money would have been——” again she paused with arch and significant lifting of the eyebrows.

“I have enough to live on,” said he, coldly.

“But not enough to—Nigel told me only yesterday you could not afford a house in Town, and—other things.”

“Did Nigel say I wished to have a house in Town?”

“Bother Nigel, don’t suppose I minded what *he* said;” an ugly gleam in the speaker’s eye. “But,” pursued she, eagerly, (for “Now’s my chance,” she thought) “we do speak of it sometimes, you know; I said to your brother: ‘It must be dull for poor Patrick down here,’” softening her tones to sympathy, “‘he ought to have other houses to go to;’ and when he said you hated visiting, I had to tell him it was not visiting I meant. Then he said in his quick way—he always snubs me, you know—‘Pat can’t afford houses all over the shop.’”

"So you thought a millionaire's daughter would put that right?"

"Well, you know, even if you chose to live on here, there is a good deal needed: I heard you say yesterday that you wished you could buy some farm or other, and that it used to be part of the Kinellan estate."

He winced. She was quite correct; he had said so, with some regret.

"So I think Mrs. Mercer might and ought to have had a daughter for you," continued she, delightfully impressive, since no daughter was there. "Here you are, with a fine old title——"

"A baronetcy is not a title." For the life of him he could not hold his tongue. He was punctilious, and Selina had made the mistake in his hearing before now; he felt he must say something to annoy her who was annoying him so fully; and though a silent man, somehow he did not wish to let the subject drop. More than once of late he had felt her approaching it, knew that it was in her mind, and was conscious of a curious sense of disappointment even when contriving successfully to evade its taking shape. It would be as well to have it out now, and put a stop once for all to hints and inuendoes.

“My poor old baronetcy is not worth much,” said he, “there are new ones every day to pick and choose from. If that is all I have to offer——”

“You dear old silly!”

But this was worse than the ‘dear man’; Sir Patrick fairly ‘girned’ in spirit. He hated Selina, and never more than when she thought herself most acceptable to him. “*Timeo Danaos*,” said he to himself, not very appositely it must be confessed, but he knew what he meant. Then all at once he lost his temper, saying openly what perhaps he had never said to mortal being before.

“What is all this about?” said he, sternly. “You have been hinting at it ever since you came to the house—and at other times. Let us understand each other. You profess that you wish me to marry. Why?” a pause. “Is it that you think so highly of domestic bliss that you can’t bear me to be defrauded of it? I can’t think so. Is it that you suppose I am a likely man to be a woman’s choice—the choice of such a woman as would be fit to preside in these walls, head our family, and take the place in it our mother took? You would not dare

to say so. Is it that you are afraid I shall look beneath me—pick up some keeper's or fisherman's lass, and—knock your chance on the head? Ha!" a harsh, strident laugh, for she started and changed colour. "Yes, I see; perhaps you think I am already married, madam?" he took a step forward, and struck the table with his hand. "Is that it?" he demanded, grimly. He felt sure that he had hit the mark.

"Indeed, indeed——"

"Whoever says so, it's a damned lie." He was hoarse with passion.

"No one has; I am sure I would not for worlds——"

"Never mind; protest if you like. But if I catch you poisoning my brother's ear—no you won't do that. Understand, however, Mrs. Kinellan, that it is as Nigel's wife, and in that capacity alone, I consent to pardon your impertinent interference in this matter. Don't suppose I am blinded by it. I know, I have known all along what you think of me. I have let you fawn upon me and fancy me deceived and gulled; but I never was so, not for a moment. My poor brother——" he paused.

"It is he who has done this." She was beginning to recover, and venom was on the tip of her tongue.

"It is not. He never speaks of you; he doesn't need," with bitter emphasis. "I am not the fool you take me for," continued Sir Patrick; "and look here, it is as well we should have this out, you and I, for it was bound to come, and things will go smoother between us hereafter. You can come here as you have always done. For the sake of——"

"Appearances," suggested she. Now she was really rather enjoying herself; the shock had passed; and it was such a joke to have made the poor little toad furious. He had outwitted her; she supposed she had not been careful enough; and of course he was sensitive on his appearance, as all deformities were. ("Oh, no; he's not quite a hunchback," she told her friends; "and he's awfully strong and broad; but he is simply hideous—at least I think so, by contrast with his brother.") This was in the days when Nigel was everything. She now suggested the word "Appearances" thinking as she did so "Good boy; no one need know, then."

'The Puddock' however, looked at her, and she could not but see the disgust in his eye.

"I was going to say, 'For the sake of the child—and Nigel,'" said he, briefly.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Kinellan; she had entirely forgotten Christabel. Now, however, she eagerly made use of her. "If you are rude to me, she will see it; she is quite old enough, I assure you."

"I shall not be rude to you."

"I hope not, but you have been very rude to-day—Patrick. (And people coming!" muttered she, to herself.)

The people coming were nothing to him, however. "I have been more than rude, I have been in earnest; I cannot risk a repetition of—of what took place just now." He turned his head away from her, but she saw a movement about the muscles of his throat as though he were swallowing something. "I repeat, I cannot risk it," he said, suddenly wheeling round; "you will please to understand this. It must never happen again—never."

"Patrick, I promise it shan't;" she jumped up, and held out her hand.

He could not refuse to take it. "Very well then. Perhaps Selina, I" — hesitating — "I

ought to beg your pardon. I don't know much about such things, but it appears to me that possibly a gentleman ought to apologise even if he has"—("unmasked a lady," to himself)—aloud, after a momentary halt, "even if both sides have been at fault. You know me, and know that I am not an ill-tempered man; but there are some points — I have lived much alone — I feel deeply——;" he bit his lip.

Selina actually felt ashamed.

CHAPTER III

"IT'S A DAMNED LIE"

AND she behaved extraordinarily well all the evening, in consequence.

There was no time to think over what had passed, and shape her conduct accordingly; but she had a palpitating sense of having been caught and caged—and again set free.

The whole scene had amazed and confounded her. She was accustomed to Sir Patrick shy, silent, and distraught,—or else at rare intervals sociable. Her blood fairly chilled when he began to stamp and tramp and his eyes to dart fire. Fierce as any savage ancestor he had unhesitatingly crushed her; then opened his hand, and let her flutter off bruised and rumpled, but with no bones broken. That was how she put it to herself.

Who would have thought The Puddock had it in him?

She knew the name, having learned it in early days when everything Nigel had to say was interesting, and boyish revelations commanded fondest attention. All were now cast out upon the rubbish heap, worthless, forgotten—and it was only in such a moment as the present that memory showed it still lived.

Even as it was, it must be owned that Selina did not speak ill-temperedly. She had had a tussle with The Puddock, and come off the worst, and bore the victor no grudge.

"I riled him;" she nodded to herself. "The poor little beast. He thought I was laughing at him. I suppose he really and truly does think no woman would look at him. Wonderful! Why, they would jump down his throat. What a blessed thing is ignorance. 'Where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise'—ha! ha! ha! But The Puddock of all people to flare up!" drumming with her fingers on the window pane,—for despite would-be coolness, there was no doubt that Mrs. Kinellan was agitated, not to say slightly unnerved.

Literally she had not dared to let her thoughts revert to the scene whilst dressing, and had hurried through her evening toilette, fearful lest

by misadventure she should be late, and Sir Patrick as usual down before her.

In consequence she was very early, and the room was empty. She could breathe, and allow herself a few flashes of reminiscence.

“Pat was out of himself with passion. He did not care what he said. I don’t fancy he lets himself go, once in a blue moon ; but there’s no mistake that it was rather earthquaky. What if he had gone still further? He might have forbidden me the house.” She turned her eyes round upon the great sun-lit room, with its many glimmering window-panes, its screened recesses, vaulted roof, and solemn, stately furniture. Taking stock of it before, she had concluded to let the drawing-room at Kinellan alone, whatever changes might be effected elsewhere in the future ; and all at once she realised what it would be to behold a possibility of never standing again where she was standing now.

Good Gracious ! She must take care what she was about. Another moment and words might have been spoken which could not be recalled. Never must she tread on that thin edge again.

But as we have said, she was not angry with her brother-in-law ; she rather admired him.

"It's a damned lie," she caught herself whispering to herself over and over again with a kind of smile. Half as much from Nigel would have driven her furious.

Then the company arrived, and just before them their host; and had Sir Patrick been in any wise a humorist, he would have seen something supremely ludicrous in the meekness of his sister-in-law beneath his supposed eye.

As a fact, he did look towards her once or twice, half expecting to be annoyed by the coolness of her manner, or by the supercilious airs which no one could put on better than Selina—but he was not in a frowning or compelling mood. Indeed, although he was relieved, relieved of an oppression which had been gathering weight within his bosom for some time past, he was half ashamed; any sort of exposure was terrible to him; and the phrase which she could not rid herself of, rang in his ears also, with a different effect. She thought it sounded well—he, ill.

At any rate the words had been spoken and could not be unspoken. He had betrayed himself on a point as to which hitherto strict reticence had been his shield and defence; and he was shrewd enough to perceive that there must be no

drawing back, no apology. *That* would simply put the halter on his neck again; and albeit it had been torn off with pain, it was off, thank Goodness!

He had shewn he would stand no nonsense. He wished he had not been made to show it, but wishing would not mend matters.

Heigho!

A sigh escaped as Sir Patrick drew himself inch by inch into his shell again. It was fine to be out of it, if only for a few brief moments. That breath of fresh air when he cared not for pope nor devil, and metaphorically wrung Selina's nose, was a glorious breath. He paused for a moment drawing off his thick, heavy boots, and cogitated, holding one in his hand.

If only he could have liked, not to say loved Nigel's wife!

There were so many things he could have said to her; so much she could have told him.

He never got near a woman. His own mother had held him at arm's length. As for men? He had not managed to make friends among men. In old days, when they came to Kinellan, it was Nigel they took to; going off with the younger, merrier lad, and bidding 'Good-night' to the

taciturn brother at the bottom of the staircase.

They had no idea that The Puddock looked wistfully after them. He would not for worlds have offered his company; and even Nigel fancied him a queer fellow who preferred to be alone.

Nigel sought out his brother now; understood him better than he ever did before; would contentedly tramp miles by his side without the interchange of a syllable;—but it was not to be expected that with all the increase of affection and comprehension, the reserve of a lifetime could be broken down.

Besides it was a racial reserve. It was the crust of ages. Nigel's free, jocular manner was often only assumed at the last moment when escape was impossible; and the Kinellan bashfulness would not infrequently re-assert itself under most inconvenient circumstances.

With Sir Patrick, however, as with his sister-in-law, time pressed; and though he must needs halt involuntarily boot in hand, with the culminating point of the scene before his eyes, and his own most strange and unusual voice thundering in his ears, soon he had to be scurrying on again. He had but just reached the turn of the big

staircase when the Mercer's carriage crashed first to the door.

And for some minutes after entering he dared not look beyond the portly presence of the millionaire's wife. So certain was he that Selina would be sulky and vindictive once out of his clutches, that at the sound of her silvery tones, sweeter than sweet, here, there and everywhere playing the hostess, he glanced round in surprise.

So, so? Nothing was to be feared then? He despised Selina more than ever, and felt more than ever convinced that it was she who had set a-going a certain rumour which had come to his ears. Had she been innocent, he argued, she would not have taken what he said as she did.

By all means however, let things be smooth on the surface. He was at one with his enemy as to that; and the cheerful buzz in the great room sounded pleasantly enough in his ears. When alone he never came into the drawing-room. When up in Town, elbowing his way among crowds, he would have an odd sensation, thinking of the calm depths and unbroken stillness of that ancient abode. It was only when Selina came that it was used.

But how well it looked, bright, and gay—the

setting sun lighting up the pretty dresses of the ladies with his last rays of splendour. The guests clustered in the windows to admire the glories without. Sir Patrick, who often looked without, on this occasion contentedly surveyed the scene within.

He was glad, certainly he was now glad that Losca Castle had been built. Now that he knew his neighbours, and was no longer overpowered by the thought of them.

At first, and before meeting with Mr. Mercer, the knowledge that a self-made man, reeking of money, was about to plant himself four miles off—no great distance in those parts—had embittered every waking hour. He who had been left so long in peace was to have peace no longer. Every kind of nightmare had presented itself to his imagination.

And these were only half dispelled by acquaintance with good old Jonathan, for there was still Mrs. Jo to be reckoned with.

When Mrs. Jo, however, proved to be if anything the better half of the two as in duty bound, The Puddock had experienced a rebound of spirits which took him out of himself altogether. He now actually regarded the Mercers as acquisi-

tions, and the giving of his first dinner-party in their honour as a pleasurable event.

Nigel, standing near the door, handsome, negligent, and truth to tell bored consumedly by the whole affair, looked in unfeigned surprise at his brother, as head well up, talking and laughing, Sir Patrick gallantly led his lady out, and albeit not so tall as she, looked by no means amiss at her side.

"'Pon my soul, Pat—the old fellow doesn't look half bad," pronounced the swell colonel, with an emotion that was almost one of tenderness.

Then he woke up and shook himself together. If that were to be the way of it, he would take the hint. He would back up old Pat to the best of his power; and away he went with his lady, prepared to put his best foot forward. The success of the evening was by this last touch assured.

In regard to its material part, the worst that could have been said was that solid excellence and old-fashioned taste prevailed; and Selina, who at another time might have curled her lip at the heavy stacks of flowers, which took the place of the lighter and more elegant table decorations

to which she was accustomed, found herself to her surprise disposed to think it all in keeping. Old-fashionedness would never do for herself, but "Upon my word," reflected she, "there is something rather splendid about The Puddock in the midst of his antiquities. A new setting would spoil him."

Out of Sir Patrick's sight she did indeed relapse to a certain extent. With the retreat of the ladies it became her bounden duty to impress upon them their inferiority, to drawl and yawn, and finally glide through the gallery door and lounge away by herself upon the terrace, leaving good Mrs. Mercer fast anchored to the sofa corner, and the younger visitors drifting aimlessly to and fro—while only Sophy Gill poked a brisk, inquisitive nose about—but Mrs. Kinellan was back in her proper place before her host made his reappearance.

"Selina, do you think we might hope for a little music?" But though Sir Patrick with his own hands opened the piano and looked interrogatively round, the music was not forthcoming.

"People only sing now when they are really good," whispered Selina, confidentially.

"What shall we have, then?" said he.

"A round game, or something of that sort."

"Oh," said Sir Patrick, blankly. ("What on earth is 'A round game'?" said he, to himself.)

He was ready, however, to do whatever was in accordance with the general inclination, and there was no doubt about the alacrity with which the new suggestion was met.

At the close of the evening he formally thanked Selina for having contributed so largely to its success, and kept to himself his opinion of her game.

It did its part; made laughter and noise, and kept every one going; she was right to have it. As to the music, she was right too. If it were not good, good of its kind that was to say, he preferred none. He simply could not endure pretentious mediocrity.

Still, Sir Patrick breathed a quiet sigh as he shut the piano when all had gone. He wondered if he should ever hear a really beautiful woman's voice filling those walls again? In his youth he remembered such an one. It was when he was an awkward school-boy, who would have shrunk in agony before the idea of any one's knowing the rapture it gave him—but he had never forgotten it. When inviting the Mercers, the thought had

passed through his mind that some of his guests might prove to be musical.

After this there were of course return civilities, and entertainments at Losca Castle on a scale which Selina had she dared would have termed ‘vulgar magnificence.’ Being determined to go to them, she held her tongue. Had she given it rein, cart-ropes would not have dragged Sir Patrick thither. He was straightforwardness itself.

The sly little cat, however, indemnified herself behind his back; and though it was impossible to absolutely cold-shoulder the people who had been at Kinellan, and with whom she had shrieked and scrambled over her game, subsequent relays of plebeian guests—and it is to be feared most of the Mercers’ guests were plebeian—had the full benefit of Mrs. Kinellan’s impertinence.

There was one especial field on which it could have full play, and this was the deck of Mr. Mercer’s steam yacht, the *Bravura*.

Sir Patrick never joined the yachting parties. He liked the sea when rough; was often out in wild weather, with his own men and his own boat—“Aye, he’ll be out many a day when he would be best at home,” Selina had once been told—but to be frizzling beneath an August sun upon the

glassy surface of the water from hour to hour, with nothing to do but make small talk, drink iced champagne, and smoke cigars on sufferance, was not to be endured; he thanked Mr. Mercer politely and accepted invitations—for his friends.

They went, and they ate and drank, and presumably enjoyed the long 'laze' on the snowy deck, with a blazing sky overhead and mirrored depths on every side—those were the days for the *Bravura* to steam out of Losca Bay, full charged with a merry crew and gaily tipped with bunting—but Mrs. Kinellan's party took their cue from Mrs. Kinellan on such occasions.

"The thing is to show from the first that we don't mean to be 'in' with them;" Selina instructed, privately. "Of course we must go. It is simply awfully nice; especially just now when it is too hot to stir on land,—but they must understand to let us alone. The old couple are nothing to mind; it is their friends who are such bounders."

"Oh, we'll tackle the bounders," quoth the Honourable Georges and Georginas.

And they were equal to it, as the event proved. If host or hostess drew near the spot where the Kinellan party had plumped down in a well-packed phalanx, the men would indeed jump up, and

affect a kind of civility—but the old people perceiving they were not wanted, would be only too glad to fall back upon their own set, and take it for granted that Sir Patrick's friends were best left to themselves.

At the close of the expedition there would be vague murmurs of "Th—anks. Jolly day. Aw'fly good of you," as they severally took leave; "and upon my word, those were the only words I heard spoken from first to last," exclaimed on one occasion good Mrs. Mercer, who was neither so blind nor so mild as she looked.

"Jonathan," said she, next day, "we'll just go to Staffa without those people." Now Selina had set her heart on going to Staffa.

But why should we linger over this foolish little woman, and her trivialities? Her like is known to us all; and we have only introduced her to our reader's notice because of the brief scene narrated in the last chapter, and the effect it had upon the after life of our hero. Presently she was gone; her autumn stay at Kinellan over; and her brother-in-law released.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he walked back to his deserted halls, having seen the party off in due style by the south-bound steamer; he strolled

through the garden, the stables, the farm; he smoked on the terrace, sitting on his favourite corner stone; he looked in at every window in succession, as he presently walked round to the front door, with the first chilly breath of evening.

It was glorious to be alone again. Not to be for-ever stumbling upon figures emerging from their rooms, or trapping him on the staircase.

Often he had to go where he did not in the least want to go, because some one else was going in his original direction. He would have to dive into the library or gun-room, in order to avoid some friend of Selina's who, equally alarmed, showed himself as anxious to be avoided.

He was sure Selina told them to get out of his way. This made matters worse. They did not get; they only tried and failed.

It will be asked: Why did he endure all this, why was he not man enough to order his house as he chose, and keep out of it people who were not wanted? The answer is simple. Sir Patrick was Sir Patrick, the representative of his race, the lord of its ancient lands. It behoved him, whether he liked or no, to keep up its hospitable traditions.

And as he could not, unaided, have summoned

above a few isolated relations, or old college friends, sadly inadequate to the demand, when the festal season came round, he was forced to depend upon Selina.

He knew that from one point of view he was safe with Selina; she would never let Kinellan down by a too-open door—and indeed to do her justice, she was careful as to the status and reputation of her guests—but this was about all that could be said. For the space of a few weeks the scene lasted; the moor was shot over, the chimneys smoked, there was bustle of servants, the old silver dish-covers came out nightly, and Sir Patrick was understood to be holding high revel in the halls of his ancestors.

He devoutly hoped so, at least; and when the annual fray was over, how thankful he was!

But with the advent of the Mercers into the neighbourhood, there arose new thought. Kinellan had done its duty, and could once more, soldier-like, stand at ease,—but how about Losca Castle? Had its revellers also betaken themselves to other happy hunting grounds? That did not, it is true, concern him; but what did concern him was that he had neighbours to whom something was due in the shape of a parting call, on the presumption

that they, like most others of their sort, were only fair-weather visitors to the Highlands.

They would be off soon—he was sure they would. What could a couple of elderly millionaires with all the world to choose from, find worth remaining for, when the tide of tourists and sportsmen had turned?

The weather indeed was fine; but millionaires can command their own weather.

“They’ll be off directly,” muttered Sir Patrick, and sat and thought.

He had great ideas as to what was due from him. His curious, secluded life led him to magnify its importance in a manner perfectly reconcilable with personal modesty. No one could think less of himself as himself; but had he moved about the world more, he would not, for instance, have worried as he did over his call on Mrs. Jonathan Mercer.

He fully meant to go. Then he put off going.

Then he began to think they must be expecting him. From this he passed to uneasy visions of their wondering at him, talking about him. Finally he was sure they would meet him with cold looks, and this completed the sum of his misery.

If he had only gone at first! Gone on the very day that Nigel and his wife left! What had now the air of being a perfunctory business, reluctantly and grudgingly undertaken, would then have been esteemed a voluntary act of grace, and as such welcomed.

"They'll wonder what on earth now brings me at all?" cried he, miserably. "Since I could let ten days pass, I might as well stay away altogether. That's what they'll think, any way. And perhaps they have told each other so."

At length there came a day when he saw the Losca carriage on the road, and dashed into a nut wood, and peered from behind a clump of rock till it passed. Screwing his eyes to a small aperture, he could perceive two ladies, and two ladies only, seated within. He brushed the moss from his coat—for he had been leaning over the mossy rock, and took up the stick he had laid down. Then turning a deaf ear to the pleadings of *mauvais-honte*, and feeling very much as if about to storm a breach The Puddock walked straight away after the retreating vehicle, and through the great gates of the castle.

They were nothing to him; neither were his rough, country clothes, nor the fact that he had no

cards in his pocket. Did not everybody he met know he was Sir Patrick Kinellan, and would not the lodge-keeper's wife have opened the gates upside down for him, had he so willed it?

He even fancied that she looked approbation, pleased doubtless that he should honour her employers by bestowing on them the light of his countenance.

"I'm glad I came, if only for Nanny's sake," reflected he. He had placed Nanny where she was.

Now if only he could make Mrs. Mercer understand that he had been frightfully busy ever since he was alone, and that the delay in paying his respects was due to this cause. "Really I have not had a moment," he arranged to say with suitable emphasis, thinking of the two letters which had had to be written that very morning, besides the number of things Mr. Wigram, the factor, had discussed and taken orders about.

"Oh, I could not possibly have come before," thought Sir Patrick, much comforted now that this solution of the problem had presented itself—(his afternoons having been absolutely vacant he had not hitherto thought of it)—"but I must be prepared for a cool reception till I can explain,"

subjoined he, tramping steadily after the footman who let him in.

Nor was he to be baulked of his explanation, even when met with outstretched hands and smiles on the part of a hostess who was both surprised and pleased.

Mrs. Mercer and Sophy were having their tea together, and very comfortable they looked, sipping and munching beside a large wood fire, which the old lady always kept alight in her drawing-room, and which a nip in the September air outside rendered a welcome sight.

"Come in, Sir Patrick; come in. We are all by ourselves, we two. My husband is off in the yacht, taking the last of our visitors as far as Oban. They'll catch the train for London there. Sophy, give Sir Patrick some tea."

Sir Patrick took a chair. "I am sorry to have been prevented calling before," began he, but was cut short.

"That tea's too strong, Sophy."

"Oh, thank you, but I like it." If there was a thing he did like it was his tea good. He now resumed: "I had hoped to be able to call before——"

"We are glad to see you any way, Sir Patrick."

These cakes are hot;" the old lady handed some.

"As soon as my visitors left, I fully intended to walk over——"

"But we have been away, my husband and I. We went off for a week in the yacht, just to see how we liked it. We had beautiful weather;" and she dilated, but Sir Patrick felt too much perturbed to listen. He could not get in his apology, and his 'frightfully busy,' and all that he had prepared so carefully for the occasion. He turned to Sophy Gill, resolved that she at least should hear him out.

It was at this moment that an idea crossed Mrs. Mercer's mind :

Sir Patrick and Sophy ! Why not ?

Stranger things than that had come to pass ; and though poor Sophy, with nothing particular to recommend her, was likely to be overlooked when others were by, it might be her day now, who could say ?

It was said that Sir Patrick was not a marrying man. That was neither here nor there. There was not a breath of scandal against him, and no reason in the world why any girl—"It's that little vixen, his brother's wife, that puts him off,"

suddenly cried our shrewd old observer. "He sees what a mess of it that handsome brother of his has made, and takes it for granted that women are all alike. And of course he's homely and stumpy. It almost seems a pity that the fine-looking colonel shouldn't be the baronet—but not *her*," hastily; "she's bad enough as she is, sprawling about on the yacht's deck, with her wicked little feet sticking out, to show them,—(a great offence)—but maybe if Nigel had been Sir Nigel he'd have married differently. He'd have got some really great lady, as good and true as they often are, not a made-up piece like Selina. *She* won't let Sir Patrick take a wife if she can help it. Not a lady visitor at Kinellan that was not married fast and firm. And how she looked at those Buckram girls the day I took them there! But Sophy wasn't worth being afraid of. Indeed, Mrs. Kinellan?" . . . A pause. . . . "My word, if it were only to see your face" and suddenly an echo of Jonathan's voice asking: "Ain't you going to get her a husband?" rose to his wife's recollection.

"We'll see," quoth she now, oracularly.

When she awoke from her reverie, Sir Patrick and Sophy were in full talk.

“They wouldn’t be much to look at,” thought Mrs. Mercer, with whom naturally, looks went a long way, “he’s plain and she’s plain, and one wouldn’t be able to cast a stone at the other. But Sophy’s a strong, cheerful lass, and she could rough it down here in the winter as well as anybody. Kinellan House, winter or no winter, would be luxury compared with what poor Sophy’s accustomed to. Well, she’s a lady by birth—anyhow her father is a gentleman, and an Oxford man; and her mother so—so. As good as the most of us. No one could say it was a low marriage—though there’s one who would say it if she could, no doubt. Sophy wouldn’t need to mind. She’s not thin-skinned, that’s one comfort. She can stand a good deal when her bread and cheese is in question; all the Gills can. Dear me! what a lift it would be to them. One or other could always be stopping at Kinellan; and the girls could wear Sophy’s old clothes——”

“Oh, thank you, I’ll bring it here for you to see,” said Sophy, at the moment.

“What’s that?” demanded Mrs. Mercer.

“It’s my handline, the handline uncle Jonathan gave me”—“Uncle Jonathan” had been instituted since Sophy became one of the family

as it were, "It's all in a muddle," protested she, "and I have been hours over it this morning, trying to wind it, so that it shall run out smoothly. It's all over the floor in the next room."

"I am going to show her how to do it," amended Sir Patrick.

"Very kind. Will you go into the room, then?"

"Oh, I can bring it here," said Sophy, innocently; and after a moment's thought the old lady nodded assent. She told herself that she must not go too fast.

When however she presently beheld the two heads bent together over the tangled skein, and the two sets of fingers twisting and turning and unravelling, while the one dictated and the other obeyed, she felt very much as if she could have apostrophised them in Meg Merrilees' memorable song :

"Twist ye, twine ye, even so
Mingle human bliss and woe."

"What is it to be? Bliss or no bliss?" whispered she, to herself. "At any rate, it's a chance. He's here alone, and she's here alone, and as I say, it's a chance. We'll not hurry off. And if Sophy wants a warm frock for the colder weather,

she can have it. Jonathan would give her the trousseau of course ; ” she concluded, letting fancy fly again.

It certainly appeared as if matters were taking shape. Sir Patrick, who was even more shy of departing than of arriving, and who had no one waiting for him at his own home, sat on where he felt easy and comfortable, until a cry from Sophy brought all three to the windows.

“ There she is, coming in, the *Bravura*. Let us go down and meet her. We shall be just in time, and there will be such a lot of parcels to carry up.”

“ I am afraid I have stayed an unconscionable time already,” said Sir Patrick, looking at his hostess with a smile—she always said he had a beautiful smile—“ but if I may escort this young lady down to the shore, and just shake hands with Mr. Mercer——”

“ He will be delighted, Sir Patrick. I would come myself, but it is a steep climb back, and I am forbidden to hurry——”

“ We shan’t be in time unless we go now,” shouted Sophy, for whom the said parcels had a special interest. She was half out of the door as she spoke.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Mrs. Mercer, almost afraid of so much good luck. "To see the yacht coming, and just in the nick of time! And to ask him to go—as good as ask him—so frankly and naturally! It really does look—it seems almost too good to be true. The poor Gills. No one will believe it. Of course Sir Patrick ought to have looked higher: I can't deny that a marriage with them is hardly up to his mark; but then he *wouldn't* look. And that's his own business. He is pretty nearly forty years of age, so it's no use hanging back and being too humble. If Sophy can catch him, she has a perfect right to, say I."

She then rose and looked from the window.

"There they go, running down as hard as ever they can. Dear me! there's no need to run like that;" softly apostrophising under her breath, "what does it matter if the boat should get in first? Jonathan can't help seeing them, and he can't escape them, for there's no other way up. There, he's at the landing place now;" straining her eyes.

And presently she had no need to strain them. Up the steep, rocky path three figures were seen ascending, slowly enough this time; and Sir

Patrick re-entered the house along with the other two.

“ Good-bye, then, and we’ll see you at dinner to-morrow night ; ” were the final words spoken ere the sturdy little baronet stumped away—while Mrs. Mercer felt anew that it was ‘ almost too good to be true.’

The next night in good time the guest appeared.

Indeed he was in such good time that only Sophy was down to keep him company for fully twenty minutes ere any one else appeared. Mr. Mercer had received business letters by the second post which needed immediate attention, and Mrs. Mercer cognisant of this, saw no need for hurrying herself. “ Give Sophy a chance,” said she to herself. The sound of a lively conversation going on between the two young people—as she termed them—struck hopefully upon her ear, as she opened the door at last ; and there they were sure enough, seated in the window of the little room supposed to be large enough for four people, to which Sir Patrick had been conducted.

Now let us see how Sir Patrick was feeling.

“ This is a very nice girl,” thought he. “ No nonsense about her. She is delighted to remain at Losca as long as ever the Mercers like to stay.

Rather wonderful, that. I thought all girls were the same, tired of the country the moment it became dull. Selina says so. And probably it is true enough of the girls she knows. This one seems of another sort."

Particularly sick of Selina as he was at the moment, there was refreshment in the very thought, and without any ulterior design, Sir Patrick made himself agreeable with an ease and freedom that surprised himself.

On his own ground he had plenty to talk about. He could recount an anecdote with humour, and appreciate the humour of others. He waxed actually garrulous at last, and was vividly recounting an adventure which had never before found an auditor—Selina's friends caring for none of these things—when his hostess appeared.

"Oh, Mrs. Mercer," cried Sophy, "you never heard anything like this. Do tell her what you did, Sir Patrick," turning to him. "Slept all night on the rock!"—turning again to her. "The rock, you know, in the middle of the loch. Do tell her;" urging him on.

Sir Patrick laughed.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Mercer.

Altogether they were a simple little party, and

even when it was completed by the arrival of good Jonathan, breathless and apologetic, there was still no one to be stiff and shy and formal with. Jonathan bundled them in to dinner post-haste, and that feat accomplished, was ready to talk and laugh with anybody.

"I wonder if you would come and dine with me?" said Sir Patrick, at the close of the evening "I am all alone over there, and it would be a great kindness. Any night?"

A night was fixed.

"Now, Sophy, put on your pink frock," said Mrs. Mercer, coming into her young friend's room at dressing time. "You may as well, my dear, for there won't be many more opportunities."

"Won't this do?" said Sophy, doubtfully. She had got out a muslin blouse and a dark skirt, in her own mind saving the pink which was her best, and even the white which was her second best, for future use.

"Dear me, no," said Mrs. Mercer, almost crossly. "You can't dine at Kinellan House in that sort of—good enough for home evenings, my dear, but not the dress to dine out in;" emphatically.

"Oh, very well," said Sophy.

That was the best of Sophy, she was always ready with her "Oh, very well" even when acquiescence went against the grain; and though in her heart she thought it nothing less than folly and waste to attire herself smartly for one man, and him a man who never saw what a girl had on, she cheerfully dressed—to please Mrs. Mercer.

"That's right," said the old lady, approvingly. "You may trust me to know what is done at great houses, Sophy; of course you can't"—(with swift, mental reference to 'the poor Gills')—"but young girls would do a great deal better than they *do* do, if they would now and then suppose older people knew about things. Sir Patrick is accustomed to Mrs. Kinellan's smart friends; you don't want him to think you a dowdy?"

"I don't want you to be ashamed of me."

"Why—aye—yes—of course." Mrs. Mercer felt a shade disappointed. "To be sure. Yes;" pondering. "I fancy it's rather a compliment his asking us," she threw out.

"This is the fourth time we've dined there," said Sophy, reflectively. "There was the first dinner, when it was daylight, do you remember? We all sat down by daylight, and it got dark, but Sir Patrick wouldn't have the lights in. Then

the next night they had to come in, in the middle of dinner. And the last time was the farewell—at least it wasn't, but we all thought it was. I never expected we should be going there again."

"No more did I. And I daresay this won't be the last time either."

"Why doesn't he have people when he's alone?" suggested Sophy.

"He's what they call a recluse, my dear. He told me himself that he hardly ever had company except during the shooting season. You see he couldn't ask ladies unless he had——"

"Why, I'm sure they'd rather be without Selina," laughed Sophy. "And though it is very nice going out to dinner again, it would be a great deal nicer if he had a houseful of people. They needn't be her kind of people. He's jolly enough when he's by himself: I daresay his friends would be jolly too. I wish he'd ask a lot down."

"You *stupid* girl!" said Mrs. Mercer, to herself.

As it was evident that Sophy was not only stupid but purblind, it behoved her to stir the stagnant waters with a delicate finger. Unconsciousness was one thing, but not to see what

was a perfectly providential opening and be ready to embrace it, was another.

After the evening at Kinellan, during which Sir Patrick not only played the attentive host, but almost the admirer to Mrs. Mercer's view, she felt she must say something—and now at last we come to the passage-at-arms between the two, wherewith our little story opens.

It took place on the morning after Sir Patrick's dinner-party.

CHAPTER IV

HOBSON'S CHOICE

IT is always an awkward thing to have strained relations between host and guest, and in the case before us there were reasons which made anything of the kind even more than usually so.

Mrs. Mercer and her young friend were now very intimate ; they were thrown upon each other's society for the best part of every day ; Sophy was under one long continued obligation ; and there was no one to whom either could disburden her mind.

"I can't and I won't tell Jonathan," said the old lady, decidedly.

The young one had not even a Jonathan to tell.

When the first rush of angry feeling had

subsided, the disagreeableness, the discomfort of the situation appalled them both.

"There now, I've been and gone and done it;" muttered Sophy, hurrying out of doors with an idea of getting away from the whole thing.

"After all my trouble! And I made up my mind when I came that I was to say 'Yes' to everything, if I died for it. She didn't care for me particularly at first; she just put up with me, and I was brought as a charity—but she had got to be quite affectionate, and I might have had the run of Dove Hall as I've had of Losca. What on earth possessed me to fly out about The Puddock? What does *he* matter? I needn't have bothered my head about him, and yet have kept in with Mrs. Mercer." A pause, "She'll never forgive me, nasty old thing. And there'll be the Hunt Ball; and the Christmas Ball; and I shan't get asked to either. I know she would have given me my frocks, too; she as good as said she would. But she's as mad as she can be with me now, because I won't marry an old man and bury myself at his old hole, and—and—I suppose she thinks he's good enough for *me*;"—tears of vexation springing to her eyes. "Just because I'm poor;"—kicking the pebbles

of the shore first with one foot, then with another. "Anybody's good enough for me," pursued Miss Sophy, bitterly, "that's Mrs. Mercer's idea. 'Aunt Louisa' indeed! I shall always call her 'Mrs. Mercer' to myself. And it would be a fine thing for me to be taken off her hands, and for her still to be 'aunt Louisa' to Lady Kinellan. Lady Kinellan!" Another pause. "If only he had been young and handsome and splendid," cried Sophy, with a groan, "wouldn't I have gone in for him then? He would have come riding over here every day, galloping, and looking up at the windows to see if I was leaning out—and I would have sailed in his boat—and we would have wandered over the moors—Oh, it's too bad, it's *too* bad—Sir Patrick might just as well have been a man one could fall in love with, instead of a stupid old Puddock." Bang went a whole shower of pebbles.

"Looking for shells, Miss Sophy?" said a pleasant voice overhead. Sir Patrick had never heard her called anything but 'Sophy' and could not have supplied a surname had he been asked. He was, however, old-fashioned, and Miss Sophy did very well for him. He was now looking down from an overhanging rock,

and perceiving that the young lady thought herself alone, felt he ought to make his presence known.

"How d'ye do? Yes, I am looking for shells;" Sophy looked up and nodded back.

"Found any good ones?" said Sir Patrick, scrambling down to her side. "I am afraid it is too early in the season, but after a good storm there are often first-rate shells all along our coasts. And have you tried the sand?"

"The sand?" said Sophy, bewildered.

Sir Patrick laughed.

"I daresay you never looked at it? Or at any rate, into it. Well, I don't know about this side of the island, but over at Kinellan there are some little bays where the sand shines, and if you take up a handful, you have simply grasped thousands of minute shells, some of them so small that they can only be seen through the microscope. I have them sifted out in different drawers. I must show you my collection."

"Oh," said she, indifferently. For a girl who was seeking for shells she was curiously indifferent.

"What have you got?" inquired Sir Patrick, who was in a chatty humour.

She had got nothing.

"I was afraid it was too early, and the weather has been too fine. You see it needs a good rousing wind to throw up the weed, and give a general stir round. I always go out after a wind."

"Were you coming to call at Losca?" suddenly inquired Sophy; an idea had occurred to her.

"I was on my way there, but I saw you, and——"

("And came after me!") But she governed herself. She must not play the fool a second time.

"I suppose you saw me from the turn of the road?" she said; "whenever we have been out, I always expect to see some one or something as soon as we reach that turn on our way home."

"And what a glorious view you get from it," cried Sir Patrick, who was a lover of Nature, and knew every point and headland and far-reaching mountain range upon which his eye now rested; knew them and studied them in all their aspects. "Look at that bar of light between us and the dark beyond. Isn't that fine? Aren't scenes like these worth living among? Did you see the sunset last night?"

"N—no. I don't think so."

"No, by-the-way, you are the wrong side for sunsets. You would only see the reflection on the hill-tops. But it was a sight." He mused, seeing it over again. "There was not a ripple, and the herring boats were all lying this way and that, their sails drying. And the blue threads of smoke curling up — I suppose the men were cooking their suppers — every single puff was reflected. And such a sky!"

("A sky!") Sophy had never looked at a sky in her life.

She felt bored and contemptuous, but prudence prevailed. She looked at Sir Patrick, and then on the ground, and the devil entered into her heart. It is not only into the hearts of the powdered and painted denizens of the world that the devil enters.

"I am sure it must have been lovely," responded she, "—and what a pity that we missed it. Do you—do you know beforehand when there is going to be a good sunset?"

"Sometimes we do, and sometimes we don't," said he. "For instance, to-night——" and he cocked his eye.

"You couldn't come over and tell us?" said Sophy, demurely.

"I am afraid it would not be much good if I did." Sir Patrick wondered a little. But it was a girl, a young girl, and an unsophisticated young girl talking; he reflected that such beings were privileged.

"At any rate we shall know that *you* are enjoying it;" and she turned her innocent eyes upon him.

"You have the sunrise, you know," said he. "And from Kinellan we see nothing of that. We are shut off by the same big mountains that shut off the sunset from you. Turn and turn about is fair play, Miss Sophy," smiling.

"I think your side of the island is so much the prettier."

So did Sir Patrick; but he was nothing if not courteous. "Losca is more conveniently placed, and no doubt Mr. Mercer took that into account. There is no anchorage for a yacht with us. And you would find it very dull without the steamers coming and going beneath your windows. Think of the post and telegraph office too, at your very lodge gates."

("My lodge gates! How delicious it sounds. He is very easy to talk to.") Aloud: "I don't care much about posts and telegraphs. They never bring anything interesting for me."

"Not from your people at home?"

"Oh yes, from my people at home, of course."

She saw her mistake; it would never do to be thought wanting in family affection. "But their letters always come by the morning post," said she, readily. "And you have that as early as we have."

"Not quite. About an hour later."

"Well, I could wait that hour," said Sophy, laughing.

Any one but Sir Patrick would have seen what she was aiming at, but Sir Patrick never saw such things. Never at least in the young. Had it indeed been Sophy's patroness who thus openly flattered and insinuated, he might have been on his guard—Selina's image with warning finger upraised, would have risen to view—but this frank, guileless damsel? No, no. He was only amused with her.

He noticed too that as they approached the castle her step quickened, it was a hurrying step at last. "She is afraid of a scolding;" thought he. He little knew that she was only panting to exhibit her prize, and that fast as she sped along, imagination flew on wings before her.

("Mrs. Mercer will forgive me all. She will

fancy I have thought better of it. There will be no more cool looks. How could I be such a silly? It will be a thousand times better to let things be pleasant, and see what turns up. He may never come to the scratch; or if he does I can hum and haw till I get safe away out of the place. Anyhow I shan't have to sit for hours with that woman scowling at me, and not a soul to pour out to. Oh! what a blessing that The Puddock turned up like this. I don't feel as if I minded him a bit to-day.")

"Jonathan," said Mrs. Mercer, from the window. Jonathan was below among the flower-beds.

"Come up Jonathan; quick," said his wife, and disappeared. When he had obeyed her summons she seized him by the coat with both hands. "Now, Jonathan, listen to me and don't be stupid. Here's Sir Patrick coming in with Sophy Gill. Now, don't you say a single word about it. If you do, that girl will fly off at a tangent as sure as fate. Now, Jonathan, do you hear me? I'm dreadfully afraid of you;" shaking him vigorously, "you're so outspoken; and unless you give me your promise that you'll be mum——"

"What's all this about?" said he.

"Oh, you men!" Mrs. Mercer was suffering from re-kindled excitement. "'What's all this about' indeed? Am I not telling you what it's about? Sir Patrick and Sophy Gill. There they are; coming along the terrace at this very moment."

Jonathan rolled his eyes round. Then rubbed them. Finally he looked almost sternly at the speaker. "Is this your doing?" he said.

"Gracious me! My doing?"

"I repeat, your doing, Mrs. Mercer. For if it is——"

"It's no one's doing." She fell back, astonished. "It's—it's just——"

"Have you been plotting and scheming?"

"That I have not."

"Sure, ma'am? Sure?"

"What do you call 'plotting and scheming'?" feebly.

"Setting them to meet each other;" he pointed with his finger at the approaching figures; "gigitting us over there to dinner——"

"You yourself heard him ask us. And as for their meeting now—I'll tell you the truth, I'd better tell it—Sophy and I had words about Sir

Patrick only an hour ago, and she flew out of the room. I merely let fall a hint that he—well, I thought, I really did, Jonathan, that he seemed *on the way*, you know—I think so still, for that matter—and I was so afraid she might say something to put him off. Of course he's not precisely a lady's man——”

“A lady's man!” almost shouted Jonathan, “she'd be a lucky lady that ever got such a man. What are you thinking of? Do you suppose if Sir Patrick chose to marry——”

“Not so loud, my dear, not so loud. Your voice does carry so, Jonathan.”

“To *even* him to Sophy Gill!” muttered he, contemptuously.

“But you said I was to get her a husband.”

“I didn't say such a husband.”

“Come now, he's not everybody's bargain, my dear.”

“Not anybody's—that's to say he'll not let himself be bargained.”

“Oh, I don't doubt there are plenty who would be well enough pleased, but they don't get the chance. Now just see what a chance this is. It could all be managed so snugly and quietly——”

“Bless my soul, woman, what are you thinking

of? Snugly! Quietly! You speak as if we were to entrap Sir Patrick——”

“No, no; Jonathan. No indeed, Jonathan; you are too hasty. All I meant was that of course if there were other and prettier girls about, Sophy is perhaps hardly the one to be picked out; but when there's nobody else——”

“It's Hobson's Choice, is it?” (He said ‘Obson's,’ but no matter.)

“I do think you are cruel to the poor thing.”

“May be. But she ought not to fly as high as Sir Patrick Kinellan. It stands to reason. What would he think if he saw——”

“Sh! Here they come,” whispered she, and he felt a clutch upon his arm. He shook it off, and turned with a frown to greet Sir Patrick. Somehow he was even more vexed with Sir Patrick than with Sophy.

What was the man about to let the women ride rough-shod over him like this? Could he not see what they were up to? “I don't like it at all,” quoth honest Jonathan, to himself.

By-and-by, however, he smoothed down; he really did not see that he need put himself in a pet, after all. Sir Patrick wore his everyday look and manner, while Sophy beneath Mrs. Mercer's

eye, made no more pretty speeches about Kinellan. There did not appear to be any self-consciousness on either hand; and should it prove that the names of the pair had merely been coupled together by his wife in a hasty moment, he would forgive her.

It set him thinking, however.

And when a millionaire thinks, it is usually to some purpose; his thoughts do not drift and ramble aimlessly about, as do those of other men. He does not say to himself such and such a thing might be done, he says "I'll do it."

Now Mr. Jonathan Mercer had a niece—oh, don't suppose dear reader, he was going to send for her in order that Sir Patrick Kinellan might fall down at Mary Harborough's feet, and say metaphorically to Sophy Gill; "Right about. Wheel. March." Nothing of the kind; but he made up his mind to get Mary to Losca all the same. "It will just put a stop to this little game;" he nodded to himself, "without any broken hearts in the case. 'Snugly and quietly' indeed!" The words grated on his ears. He foresaw what he termed a hole-and-corner business, such as revolted his inmost soul.

"Not that she means it, poor soul," reflected he, thinking of his wife; "it's only that she's a

woman, and all women are alike. They can't for their lives look at both sides of the question. And though I might put to her till I was black in the face that if a man wouldn't look at a girl unless so be as there was no other to look at, she's not the girl for him, that woman would just say "Dear me, Jonathan!" (mimicking) "and go on inviting Sir Patrick all the same. Now I suppose she'd say I was a brute," pursued he, knitting his bushy brows, and glancing at the trio who, blissfully unconscious, talked and laughed while these fateful ruminations were going on, "but old Jonathan isn't going to stand by and see *that* sort of thing go on under his nose. This nose smells a rat, and the smell ain't good. Lady Harborough will just have to lend her precious Mary to her vulgar old brother, or the vulgar old brother will know the reason why. It ain't often I ask the favour; but when I *do*, ma'am——"

Jonathan smiled.

He could put the screw on at any moment.

His sister, who had married right up among the grandees as he was wont to tell his friends in confidential moments, was a widow and mainly supported by him. Her paltry jointure—paltry according to his ideas—would have gone

but a very little way in the maintenance of an ambitious woman with a beautiful daughter for whom a brilliant future was anticipated. She had appealed to her dear and only brother—he had never had so affectionate a letter from her before — and he had responded to her entire satisfaction. Thenceforward he could command, where he had hitherto had to beseech.

And in his heart he was immensely proud of the Harborough connection.

He could not help it ; he despised himself for it ; he tried to think he would have been better pleased had May—his dear little pretty flaxen-haired May, with whom he used to play on the green after school hours, and who had all the boys of the place bringing her sweets and holding the swing while she swung—he tried to think he would have chosen a husband for her out of his own class if he had been consulted ; but it may be doubted if she as Mrs. Smith, or Mrs. Brown would have received the cheques which filled Lady Harborough's bosom with thanksgiving.

She was many years her brother's junior, and he was already well up the ladder on the way to fortune, when Sir Philip came along, an elderly man with an itch for a third wife.

“Don’t have him if you don’t want him ;” said Jonathan. But he was conscious of being glad when she said she did want him, and meant to have him.

What was more, the brother always maintained that the sister had chosen wisely. She knew her own mind, he said, and was not as soft-hearted as she looked. He fancied that if she had settled down with ‘Dick, Tom, or Harry,’ the fellows of her youth, she would have repented it. She was always full of ideas.

Even to himself, good old Jonathan scarcely liked to acknowledge that had he been less wealthy and liberal, his footing at Harborough Chase would not have been by any means what it was. “She is fond of her old brother,” he would say rather doubtfully. “May ain’t what you call a tender feeling woman, but she is fond of her old brother.”

He stood godfather to May’s only child as a matter of course. The little one was taught to toddle to his knee, and peer in the pockets of his great-coat, where it always found something. “Your uncle is really *too* good to you ;” Lady Harborough would allege on birthdays.

But as Mary grew up (she was never ‘May,’

the name would not have suited her) she came less and less to Dove Hall. "We shall be so glad to see you and Louisa here," would be a frequent formula in Lady Harborough's writing, "but Mary is busy with her lessons, and it would be a pity to interrupt them."

Or if it were holiday-time, Mary was growing so fast that she was to be sent to the sea by the doctor's orders; or, she had been promised a trip abroad with her parents, and had been looking forward to it for so long that her mother feared it would be too great a disappointment to give it up now.

But always accompanying such refusals would be the summons to come and see Mary in her own home; and with this the childless uncle and aunt were fain to be satisfied.

When they went nothing could be nicer, and no one kinder than host and hostess.

Sir Philip, a thin, whitefaced, alarmed-looking man, rather enjoyed his burly brother-in-law's company, and listened respectfully to his talk, especially if Jonathan talked about money. He knew that he might wear his old dinner suit with impunity when Mr. and Mrs. Mercer were as they often were, the only guests. N.B. Lady Har-

borough used to protest that a family party was always the pleasantest, when the Mercers found no other occupants of the spare rooms. Whereat Jonathan's eyes would twinkle; and once he said something, in consequence of which there were two other couples already installed and prepared to be agreeable, on his next appearance at the Chase. Her ladyship, who was clever in her own way, was quick to see when a mistake had been made.

But the older Mary grew, the less likely did it appear that she would ever pay her homely relations any but the most severely and formally hedged-in of visits. Mary herself pleaded in vain.

"I should like to go all by myself for a long, long time," she said once, when on the verge of eighteen: "uncle Jo said he would like it, and so did aunt Lou. Why can't I go?" For she was a spoilt child, and whined for what she wanted.

"Can't she go?" inquired Sir Philip. His eldest daughter (for he had a first family) would have gone anywhere, and it did not occur to him that Mary's mother was in terror lest the old strain in the blood, so carefully kept out of sight in her own case, and so anxiously guarded against

in her daughter's, might re-appear under fostering circumstances.

"We don't know *what* sort of people they might have," she replied; "and after all the pains I have been at to avoid giving offence, and yet never have Mary mixed up in a lower set than what she is accustomed to, it would be simple folly to let her go to Dove Hall now; now of all times. Just when she is to be presented and brought out—and so much depends upon her bringing out." To hear the great lady talk, would any one have guessed that her mother had cooked her own dinner and washed her own linen?

Even Sir Philip, who was getting old, had forgotten by this time.

And Mary herself never knew. Her Harborough grandmother had been a beauty, and a toast; and once Jonathan Mercer heard the young girl boasting of this. "We have her miniature here," said Mary.

"Shew it to your uncle, dear," said her mother. Aside, "It is thought so like *her*;" nodding and smiling.

Jonathan said nothing at the time. The next day he was alone with his niece, and the miniature on a table close by. "You have no picture

of your other grandma, Mary?" said he, quietly.

"Why, no; uncle. I never knew there was one."

"Do you know anything about her, my dear?"

"No, uncle. I—I am afraid I do not." Mary hung her head a little.

"She was a very good woman," said Jonathan, steadily; "she worked and toiled; and had she lived, it would perhaps have been better for your ma and me; for she would have brought us up in the fear of the Lord, as I've heard the neighbours say,—but we never knew—leastways May never knew what a loss she had in being left motherless before she was twelve years old, even if"—he paused and looked steadfastly at Mary's daughter, wondering whether he dared to finish the sentence as he was finishing it within his own breast? He felt that he ought, he wished that he could,—but the moment passed, and Lady Harborough never knew how near she had been to the edge of a precipice. This had happened before the days of her widowhood.

After that, Jonathan was more careful. He realised that with Sir Philip gone, and his son (himself a married man with a family) in possession, the two females were in a manner at his

mercy ; and something of the old protecting fondness he had had as a boy for the little sister who had no one but himself to care for her, returned for the widow who once again depended for so much on him.

She was ' grand ' of course ; but he thought she had a right to be grand, and would not have liked to see her in anything but the best of company, holding her head up among them.

He paid the big rent for the small house in the heart of Mayfair without a qualm.

He went with May to see after carriages. She would have put up with some not quite in the latest fashion, but Jonathan would not.

He declared for a second footman. The widow's eyes glistened at his extravagance.

" And see that she's turned out ' up to Dick, ' " concluded he, with a glance at Mary. " Don't stint her, (always remember that he said 'er),— " and if any feller comes along and you're satisfied, and she's satisfied, send him to me."

The Dowager Lady Harborough took both her brother's hands in her own and kissed him. There are some people upon whom liberality makes more impression than any other virtue.

We can thus understand then when it entered

into the mind of our worthy friend to summon his niece, in order, as he freely put it, to bowl out Miss Sophy Gill, whose acquiescence in his wife's designs he did not for a moment doubt—else why all this bridling and coquetting?—he was not, we repeat, hampered by any doubts of being able to carry out his purpose.

Once or twice of late he had nearly sent for Mary. On first going down to Losca, he had longed to propose her making one of the party. But an opportune medical order for German baths had nipped, as possibly it was meant to nip, any such contingency in the bud.

“If they would have us by ourselves,” the fashionable dame confided to her daughter, “I’m sure I would go, and so would you, dear. Gladly. Cheerfully. Such a dear uncle; and poor Louisa is quite harmless. But they *will* have such dreadful people. Anybody who wants board and lodging can get in at Dove Hall; and no doubt it will be the same, or more so, at Losca Castle. I know we always heard their house-parties in the Highlands were the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. No, we can’t go, Mary; not at present. When you are a little older, and have established your position——”

“Oh, what *does* that matter?” cried Mary, impatiently.

“My dear, that is it, that is just it. It is because you are always thinking it doesn’t matter”—Lady Harborough frowned and bit her lip, she could not explain, could not get her daughter to see without explanation—finally had to fall back on vexation and silence,—but what she was saying to herself was that if the tiresome girl could only perceive how much it mattered, that it would not have mattered one half as much—a curious grammatical product in the way of an aphorism, but there is no doubt her ladyship knew what she meant.

“I think all that sort of thing’s nonsense,” said Mary, bluntly. Then she burst out: “Why need we mind more than other people? Everybody goes everywhere now-a-days. The De Vesce girls are going to stop with their coalman. They think it the greatest fun. They say they have seen his name on the coal-trucks at the station. Maud De Vesce says it’s a shame to waste such a visit in hot weather, as they might have coaled up all night in their bedrooms, if they had gone in the winter. And uncle Jo is your own brother——”

Here again Mary missed the point.

In the end, however, she yielded ; indeed she had no very strong feelings on the subject either way, and with all the good things of the world to pick and choose from, could dispense with the exercise of self-will on an immaterial point.

Someday or other she would go to Losca Castle ; and meantime she went here, there, and everywhere, enjoying life as much as a girl could.

“ I do think Mary Harborough has the best time of any of us ; ” was a frequent remark in the Harborough set, and it was a set in which most of its members had good times.

Mary was, as we have said, beautiful—she was also healthy, vigorous, high-spirited, and absolutely without an apparent care or trouble.

Her father's death had removed a kindly old man, and what was more, taken away a home to which she was fondly attached ; but youth soon becomes reconciled to the inevitable, and she meant to have a country house of her own presently.

Presently. When she had decided on the person who was to share it. So far he had not appeared, but “ You know, my dear,” said the mother, in one of the ‘ little talks ’ which from time to time circumstances rendered desirable,

"there is no need to hurry. You are not like other girls, Mary. Your good, kind uncle——"

"But I don't want to be married for my money," cried Mary, indignantly.

"There is no fear of that." Lady Harborough regarded fondly, proudly, and significantly the glowing face which always looked its best when thus stirred. "I really think you need not worry about that. Even supposing it is conjectured that you are likely to inherit a fortune——"

"Conjectured? Everybody knows."

"They can't know. They may suppose. They may even take it for granted——"

"They do know. Mother, what is the use of pretending? As if Johnny Stapleton would ever have——"

"It was extremely presuming of Captain Stapleton to think of you at all. A fifth son! He ought to have considered himself——"

"It was his people who egged him on, you know."

"His people? He pretended he was madly in love with you!"

"He wasn't. He only had to say it."

"At any rate there was Sir Harry Bright, and Lord Alexander Gowrie. Both very suitable.

Not that I wished you to have either of them, but there was no harm in their speaking."

"Oh, no harm. But they didn't want me, all the same."

"My dear child, what do you mean? If they did not want you, what did they ask you for?"

"They didn't want *me*, they wouldn't have minded Miss Harborough. She was good enough, all things considered. She had a decent appearance; and there was the old josser at her back——"

"Mary, Mary!—Really, really! I—you really startle me sometimes. Where you can have picked up," cried her ladyship genuinely annoyed, not to say alarmed—"such words, such language——"

"It's all right. We all talk like that now," Mary nodded re-assuringly. "Keep your hair on, dear. I assure you I am nothing to the rest of us. And besides, I was only talking *à la* Harry and Sandy. *They* would say 'the old josser' and I was showing you them talking behind our backs. I know how they would do it exactly. And don't you imagine you have kept uncle Jo dark. Not quite. They know all about it——"

"Know all about it!" faintly.

“Who he is, what he was, and what he has. They know that he runs us two,”——

“‘Runs us’ !”

“The whole show knows it,” waving her hand round about. “My dear lady, Harry asked me one day straight out, if it wasn’t so?”

“And you told him?”

“Of course I told him. Why shouldn’t I? None of us mind those sort of things. You are so awfully old-fashioned——”

Old-fashioned? Lady Harborough recovered herself. To be old-fashioned was creditable and respectable. She had no sort of objection to being old-fashioned; and if it were true that the present generation—she struggled with herself, wondering if she should ever be able to cope with the present generation?

“It does seem all very strange to me,” she said, with a sigh which was not quite natural, but good imitation——“but I have lived so long out of the world (she had never till within recent years lived in it) that you will have to be my instructor, I suppose. At any rate about the young people. So you think they are all greedy, calculating, and vulgar?” with some bitterness.

“Not all. I think there are some very nice

ones. But they don't ask me to marry them—for that reason."

"Good Gracious, child!" A desperate fear entered into the parent's heart. She had heard that plebeian birth, that sometimes it was allowed some weight in the scale; and since this rude, coarse Sir Harry had had the impertinence to enquire of poor Mary to her own face as to the financial arrangements of the family, to what other lengths might he not have gone?

It was true that nothing he had heard had kept him back; but this was not to say he might not have spread abroad enough that was most unfortunately true about the beautiful and prospectively rich Miss Harborough, to deter more eligible and disinterested men.

Mary herself appeared quite indifferent. "There is nothing against me," she said, frankly, "I'm all right. Only the men I know aren't the kind that fall in love; and if they were, I don't suppose there is anything in me to fall in love with. I'm just like other girls. It doesn't in the least matter if you're good-looking or bad-looking now-a-days. All you've got to do is to dress, and when you're dressed, to talk, and be smart, and know about things. I can do it—

but so can we all. Vi Chippenham is awfully ugly *really*, but she gets on as well as any of us, and whacks about everywhere, holding her head up, and giving herself the airs of a beauty. That girl has more men round her than—well, than I have ;” said Mary, laughing.

“Nonsense ;” said her mother, angrily.

“It’s true. And I’ll tell you—I think it’s partly,” she hesitated, “Vi sticks at nothing, and—and I do. She said once I was *bourgeois*——”

“What?” A stab shot through Lady Harborough’s veins.

“I wouldn’t laugh at something, and I wouldn’t pretend to laugh. Never mind what it was ; you wouldn’t understand ; but they all thought it very funny, and I thought it disgusting. Vi was perfectly furious at this ; and she thought she’d take it out of me, so what do you think she said, turning round to the rest : ‘The middle-classes are more particular than we are.’ It *was* a nasty one.”

“What—what did you say ?”

“I said—I’m afraid you won’t like it, mother dear,”—Lady Harborough put out her hand and took the slim, pretty hand which lay upon the cushion by her side, she was not often called

‘Mother dear’—“you know I never mean really to vex you,” continued the girl, with a flush of earnestness, “but I couldn’t help myself. I should have felt so mean if I had let it pass.”

“So you said——?”

“I said: ‘If that’s the case I’m glad I have some middle-class blood in me, and I only wish I had more of it than I have.’”

“What did she say?”

“She said——” A pause.

“You can tell me what she said, Mary.” Lady Harborough spoke rather low, but steadily.

“You mustn’t mind, mother: I tell you they all know. Only no one but Vi Chippenham would have said it out. When I ‘wished I had more of it’—it was awfully foolish of me to say that, but I hadn’t a moment to think, and it just let that girl in—she said, quick as lightning: ‘About equal parts, isn’t it?’ and laughed in my face.”

There was a long silence, the eyes of both upon the floor. Then Lady Harborough slowly rose to leave the room. At the door she stood still for a moment, the handle between her fingers: “Mary,” she murmured, her lips trembling and her cheek slightly flushing as she spoke, “did you mind much, Mary?”

There was a quick step behind, an arm was round her neck, and a kiss upon her cheek.

“Except for your sake, I didn’t mind a two-penny—ahem!” cried she, gaily. “There now; if that doesn’t vindicate my blue blood on one side of the house, what would? Honour bright, my dear mother. I have always wished you would allow me not to be ashamed of——” she stopped.

“Of me, Mary?”

“Of your family. Of dear uncle Jo, and all the rest of them.”

“There is no ‘rest’ my dear,” with a sigh of relief.

“There was, once, and people know it. They don’t speak of it, of course, except in a fight, as that girl did;—but they know it, all the same. And though there’s no need to thrust it down their throats, why should you and I—what I mean is, let us be honest; don’t let us pretend to be what we are not, and don’t let us mind when we’re known for what we are. And one day you’ll let me go and visit uncle Jo, won’t you?”

CHAPTER V

"SOPHY—MY NIECE, MISS HARBOROUGH"

ALL this time Jonathan has been sitting, somewhat ill-manneredly we must confess, glowering at Sir Patrick, and biting his fingernails, so that the best disposed of his fellow mortals would scarcely have supposed him to be engaged—actually engaged at the very moment of his looking so surly and disagreeable—in mental projects for the benefit of The Puddock.

The Puddock sat on a low seat, and looked up at his friends. He never thought of himself and his appearance, or he would not have chosen that seat. It made him seem broader and squarer than usual; it brought into prominence his thick, short feet and heavy shoulders. As his eyes were lifted, one saw that they were large, soft, and bright—but again they had something of the

protruding fulness of the homely creature whom he was supposed to resemble.

("Gracious me! he needn't have squatted down there!" inwardly exclaimed the lady who favoured him, thinking of the lady who did not. "There are plenty of good chairs?") "Won't you take a more comfortable seat, Sir Patrick?" said she, aloud.

Sir Patrick thanked her, but was very well where he was.

"You're right in the draught;" she tried, next.

"Draught? Oh!" Sir Patrick glanced round with a laugh; "I am always in a draught; I live in a draught. If I did not insist on opening every chink at Kinellan, I should choke. Walls seven feet thick don't allow of much circulation of air, especially when you have servants whose chief end in life it seems to be to keep out what little there is."

"Servants are very troublesome," said Mrs. Mercer, placidly.

"I have found a cure for that," replied he, with a sly look.

"Indeed? A cure? What is it?"

"Let them do whatever they like, and then undo it myself when I get the chance."

"But dear me, Sir Patrick," said Mrs. Mercer, when the laugh occasioned by this sally had subsided, "that is rather a roundabout way to take. It sounds a little as if you were—it sounds rather like a bachelor master," archly. "I doubt if it would answer were there a mistress in the case."

"So Selina tells me. She looks askance upon my domestic *régime*. I'm bound to say I fancy the feeling is reciprocated."

"Mrs. Kinellan said she thought you ought to have a house in Town," put in a new voice, as Sophy thought she had been out of the conversation long enough. "Why don't you, Sir Patrick?"

"They wouldn't let me, Miss Sophy."

"They? Who?"

"Macallum and Mrs. Macallum: Macdougall and Tom Macdougall: Old Maclachlan and young Maclachlan. My tyrants generally."

"Do you mean your *servants*? Do you let *them* say what you are to do, and what you are not to do?"

"There is no 'letting' required, I assure you. Occasionally I obtain permission to run off for a week or two in the summer to hear a few operas, and see a few pictures, and bring back

word about the Crystal Palace Horse Show—once I was allowed to buy a couple of horses after it—but it is as much as my place is worth to outstay my leave of absence. Macallum takes a return ticket for me.”

“Mrs. Mercer, does he mean it?”

“I doubt he is laughing at us, Sophy.” The two regarded their romancist with somewhat doubtful smiles.

“Indeed, I am doing nothing of the sort,” protested he, stoutly. “You should hear my sister-in-law on the subject, and I declare she does not know the half. I keep it from her—half my time is spent in keeping it—how well I am under the household thumb. She thinks it is only within the walls of Kinellan, and she frets and fumes at that. Between ourselves, Miss Sophy, I do a little laughing in my sleeve occasionally; and my good old faithful creatures know it, and are as stubborn as mules—even my brother has a laugh with me in private over it all—but I believe his wife would cry aloud to the house-tops if she knew that it is Macdougall (who loves the sea,) who tells me that I want to go fishing, and his son Tom (who is a good shot,) who drags me up the heights after the ptarmigan.”

"They take you when you don't want to go?" cried Sophy, staring.

"Even so," said Sir Patrick, mildly.

"Well, if they were *my* servants——"

"What would you do?" said he, with some curiosity.

"Send every one of them out of the house."

"It would be your only chance of a quiet life," said Sir Patrick, rising to go. "But as you see, the spirit of resistance has been crushed out of me; and even now I am trembling lest an angry gong should wake the echoes of the glen before I have reached a certain boundary line within which I must be at a given time before dinner. If I am not there, there will be faces at every window, and the great Macallum in swollen fury and distended dignity upon the doorstep. I tried once to sneak in by another door, but he headed me off before I could reach my own staircase. I shall never resort to stratagem with Macallum again."

He took his leave, and Mrs. Mercer turned to her husband.

"Sir Patrick can be very amusing," she said, "but though one needn't take all he says for

gospel, it does seem to me that he badly wants a wife, and his house a mistress."

"It does seem to me then," quoth Jonathan, drily, "that it's odd he should have waited till we came to find out his wants—supposing he has found them out."

"Did you hear what he was saying?"

"I heard a mumbling. I didn't hear what about."

"Because you would stay so far away. You should have come over here and sat among us. Sir Patrick was quite talkative."

"I never heard anything like him," chimed in Sophy.

Mrs. Mercer's brow smoothed with benignity. She primmed up her mouth and bridled. "It isn't always the best-looking men—I had rather any day have a pleasant companion than a fine figure-head with nothing in his noddle."

"That's a compliment to me," observed Jonathan. He was determined not to see what she was aiming at. "She never pretended she thought me a beauty," to Sophy, "but I cut out the dandies with her, all the same. What's your opinion, young lady?" And he shot a quick, shrewd, investigating glance.

"Now for it;" thought Mrs. Mercer,—but she on her part would not look. After what had already passed, she had no desire to force the situation. Bear in mind that it was only a few hours since Sophy had hated ugly men.

"I—I don't think it much matters," faltered she.

"Gad! She's throwing her fly already!" ejaculated Jonathan Mercer under his breath.

Then all in a moment he bustled out of the room, and was heard asking Thomas, the under footman, if the post had gone? It had not, and Thomas was desired to go to the library for a letter before it did.

In the course of the evening, the old gentleman thus addressed his wife. "You were thinking of taking a trip to Oban one day this week, weren't you?"

"If the weather keeps fine," replied she. "I have promised Sophy a Scotch frock,"—"Which Sophy came precious near losing," mentally commented that damsel).—"She did not expect to be here in October," pursued her kind patroness, "and it is often chilly in October. You are not in a hurry to go back to Dove Hall are you, my dear?"

"Not at all," said he, grinning to himself.
"So long as you are content, I am."

"The place suits us both, I fancy, Jonathan."

"Down to the ground," replied he.

"And Sophy says she's delighted."

Sophy showed a 'delighted' expression.

"So I don't see that we need be moving," pursued the wily old lady, thinking how clever she was. "Sir Patrick was saying only the other day that it is a pity everybody flies off from the Highlands just when they are at their best. They are never at their best in the shooting season—for people who don't shoot, at least. August is pretty nearly always a wet month, Sir Patrick says."

"It was a fine month enough this year."

"So it was. But Sir Patrick says——"

"He seems to have said a good deal." For the life of him Jonathan could not suppress the interruption. No husband likes to have another man quoted out of all reason, and what with barometers, rain-gauges, and his own incessant observations, why should old Jo Mercer not be permitted to know as much about the weather as other folks? Even his gardeners and fishermen did not offer their opinion on this subject

too freely, perceiving whom they had to deal with; while only that day one of them had asked him—aye, and asked with every appearance of interest, not to say anxiety, what 'the glass' said? It was ridiculous to thrust Sir Patrick down his throat after such a compliment from Mungo McTaggart—Mungo, who had lived all his life upon the place.

"I should hope I know a blue sky when I see it, as well as Sir Patrick Kinellan," proceeded he, testily, "and it isn't quite the first autumn I've spent in the Highlands——"

"Not in the West, my dear."

"West? What's West? Don't make Sir Patrick out a fool. He's well enough; a sharp little body, and——"

"Good gracious, Jonathan!" Reproach and consternation caused Mrs. Mercer's rich silk dress to rustle all over, as she moved irrepressibly in her chair—("Little body!" she muttered to herself). What girl, already only half reconciled to a lover's appearance, or lack of appearance, could hear him called a "Little body" without its taking effect?

"I think you're quite rude," said she, reddening. "Tall or short, what does it matter?"

You're none so tall yourself, but I wonder how you would feel if you heard yourself called a 'Little body.' Sophy, give me that—that——" She wanted nothing, but she must have a look at Sophy, and pointed impatiently with her finger into vacancy.

"What is it, aunt Louisa?" said Sophy, innocently.

"Can't you see, child? The—the screen, of course. These enormous fires——"

"Oh, to be sure;" said Sophy, hastening up.

The screen was carefully adjusted, and a foot-stool for aunt Louisa's feet thrown in. No one could pay such little attentions more dutifully and handily than Miss Sophy; and as she now took up the old lady's knitting, and proceeded to point out sundry dropped stitches which in the heat of the argument had slipped the needle, her face close as it was to the electric lamp, and pitilessly exposed to the scrutiny of both her companions, betrayed no emotion of any kind.

"She must have heard;" thought they.

But they could not be sure. They often fancied Sophy was a little deaf. Certainly she was not inconveniently quick of hearing; "And really with a man who blurts out everything that

comes into his head, it's a blessing to have some one who never puts herself about to listen, at any rate ;" Jonathan's more prudent spouse more than once congratulated herself.

Each, however, now thought that enough had been said, Mr. Mercer to disparage The Puddock, Mrs. Mercer to defend him,—and by common consent they reverted to the subject which had occupied them before his name entered into the conversation.

"Since you and Sir Patrick have settled it between you that the weather is to be fine," said Jonathan, sarcastically, "perhaps you'll let me know when you've fixed your day for Oban? Captain Binks likes to get his orders in good time, and we haven't been out lately."

"Why not go to-morrow, Jonathan?"

"To-morrow? That's sharp practice. I—I don't know that I am exactly wanting to go to-morrow."

"The next day, then?"

"Or Friday? I may have business in Oban on Friday. Some one to meet perhaps? (She certainly can't come before Friday;" calculated he, inwardly).

And when Friday was agreed upon, he

chuckled. All would fall out easily, naturally, unsuspectingly. He pictured the explanation scene, and heard his own voice talking.

He had taken a fancy to send for his niece, and to make her coming a pleasant surprise. Losca Castle was a big place to be wasted on three people; and having one girl, he had had the happy thought of getting down another for company.

And of course he could not have Miss Harborough sooner; that was not to be expected. Miss Harborough—the speaker was wont to breathe audibly, and speak through his nose with a peculiar intonation when Miss Harborough was his theme)—she was far too much sought after, run after, hurried after, for ordinary folks to have a chance while the great rush was on. He had waited for a slack time. October was a slack time as times went with the Harboroughs. They were always in request—but he believed there was a chance, a bare chance that they might be caught in October.

He heard himself saying it all; the beginning part for his wife's benefit, the remainder for that of Sophy Gill and Sir Patrick Kinellan.

For Sir Patrick he would also add a codicil.

He had but to say openly—though by way of confidentially—that his niece would eventually inherit all his wealth, to feel safe from any aspiration in that quarter. "Little Stumpy's honest as the day," reflected he. "He may talk big about the weather, and like to have the women thinking that he knows a lot more about it than the rest of us do,—but that's the worst you can say of him. To tell him about the money would put the muzzle on at once. He's a good, *good* sort," slowly. "Too good for that Sophy creature; almost—but not quite good enough for Miss Mary Harborough. Mary must have a duke. Or, an earl would do. We can't let her go beneath an earl. And why?" banging his fist upon the table. "Because, sir," addressing an imaginary audience, "beauty and money is a combination so scarce that it can command the market. It can, and it shall. Mary's a nice girl too;" he added, with a sudden drop to an everyday voice.

He would have thought so afresh had he witnessed the reception of his missive in Deanery Street.

"I'm going;" said Mary, looking at her mother with decision.

"You must go, you have no choice. When uncle Jo puts down his foot, it is no use to struggle. But it is very inconvenient and tiresome."

"Not at all;" said Mary, gaily. "Not at all inconvenient—nor tiresome. Why shouldn't uncle Jo want me? And I would rather go now than at any other time."

"Do you really mean it?" said her ladyship, incredulously. "Of course it is better than if they had a houseful of tiresome nobodies, people of their own class—now don't look at me," breaking off with an air of vexation. "And it is not true, Mary. I never did belong to your uncle Jonathan's class. I was quite a little, little thing, when he rose in the world——"

"And took care of you, and educated you, and did everything for you, didn't he?"

Lady Harborough coloured fretfully. "You always speak as if I wished to disparage my poor brother. How can you fancy such a thing? I am extremely fond of him, as indeed I may well be; but you can see for yourself that he is not—not quite like the people we are accustomed to meet."

This was true; Mary could not deny it.

"It was very much to his credit," Lady Harborough pursued her advantage, "that he should by his own unaided exertions—for he had no help from anybody—have reached such a position as he holds now; and still more that from the very first he lifted me, a poor helpless little thing, along with him;—but Mary, my dear, though it would be most ungrateful and unnatural for me to feel anything but—but——"

"You never seem to care to see him."

"Care to—to see him," stammering a little.

"Well, yes;" said Mary, briskly. "I know you write; and I suppose you gush in your letters; and you tell me that we ought to be grateful and that sort of thing,—but when uncle Jo says he's coming here, or wants me to go there, you always look terribly blank. Oh, you do," forestalling a disclaimer; "you try to pump up a little affection and welcome when the time comes,—but you wish it wasn't needed. You would like him just to write, and send cheques——"

"Oh, Mary!"

"Now if I had a brother," said Mary, "I don't believe I should care *what* he was like. If he

was good and kind, and fond of me, I would want him to be always with me; I would go to his places, and take him to mine; we would go about together, and sit and talk together, and tell each other everything——”

“Stop a moment,” said Lady Harborough, eagerly. “That sounds very well, and no doubt you mean it, and perhaps would do it—under certain circumstances. But put away the imaginary brother from your thoughts for a minute, and put your uncle Jonathan in his place. Can you honestly say that you would wish to take such an uncle—such a brother, I should say—to the houses we visit, to the places we go to? Would you like to introduce him at our parties as your nearest relation? It is easy to make up a pretty picture of brother and sister, when you can concoct the brother for yourself, but—and he is so many years older too,” she murmured in somewhat lame conclusion.

“I suppose—perhaps—that is it,” reluctantly conceded Mary. “Still it does seem hard that if it hadn’t been for him you would never have known enough to be ashamed of him.”

A pause ensued. The truth thus frankly stated was unanswerable.

"Well, what about Losca?" Mary having said her say, which indeed she had said before more than once, recovered her good humour; "what about Losca?"

But her mother's conscience still pricking, she made answer somewhat bitterly. "It does not seem to me there is any need to ask about Losca. You and your uncle have settled it between you."

"We have, but about you?"

"Me? I am not invited."

"What will you do? Where will you go?"

"That apparently is of little consequence. I can be disposed of. I can remain here,——"

"Here? In London, in October?"

"Why not? Your uncle has provided a roof over my head——"

"Don't be cross, dear; and don't visit my sins on uncle Jo's head. I couldn't help saying it, because I do think—but after all, of course—anyhow *he* never complains. And if you don't want him, you can't make yourself want him. Perhaps he doesn't want you," she added laughing, "as he has not invited you; but I am sure he would never dream of your moping here by yourself; he thinks you have heaps of friends who would be only too delighted to have you."

"I don't know that they would. Without you, what am I? Only your mother."

Eventually, however, she recollected certain dull houses upon which Mary would be wasted, but where she herself could vegetate, wear her old clothes, go to bed early, and give her maid a rest—and from these a selection was made.

"And mind you give your uncle my love, and say he mustn't keep you too long," said she, at parting. "You must be back for the Middlefield's Hunt Ball at any rate. I know Lady Middlefield intends to ask us; and we could start from there upon a round—but I won't bore you with plans at present; we can wait and see what turns up. The only fixture shall be the Milborough Ball; and it can be used to extract you from Losca. A fortnight of Losca is as much as you would care for, or your uncle expect."

"All right;" said Mary, amicably. She thought so herself.

But she meant to enjoy her fortnight. It was such fun to be dashing north just when every one else was dashing south; such a joke to be going all alone, to uncle Jo and aunt Lou in their vulgar grandeur, and to run wild without

a soul to speak to but the two poor old dears. (Jonathan had suppressed Sophy.)

She was not afraid of being dull; she looked forward to it. She would be out of doors from morning to night — out on the shore before breakfast.

And of course she would climb the hills—climb every hill within reach. She would fish and shoot—no, by the way, the shooting might not be feasible, seeing it was October, or nearly October, and besides her uncle had no moor —(Jonathan was sick of moors)—but fish she should and would.

Every brawling stream by whose banks the panting train groaned and toiled—"Is it all uphill?" she wondered occasionally—was eyed by our youthful traveller with enthusiasm. How clear and brown and rushing the water looked! How brilliant were the scarlet rowan-trees which fringed its way. Here and there was a blue tarn, set in peat bogs nearly black. Then a real lake would glitter and lose itself far away in the background. To crown all, at one point, there was a powdering of frost, and a range of jutting peaks sparkled like diamonds in the sun.

Mary Harborough stood at the open window, the solitary occupant of her carriage; having bundled her good old Sarah in elsewhere, that she might be alone, and draw deep breaths of freedom and delight.

"Oh, why have I never had this before?" she cried half aloud, "I might have had it. Not without a fight perhaps, but it would have been worth a fight. It is splendid. It is glorious." And though beforehand she had been urgent for solitude, she now almost wished there had been some one to whom she could be rapturous. An immature and inconsistent creature was Mary.

But at least she was sincere. She was no paragon. Not at all clever, not in the least profound, nor even very sensible—it is cruel to be so plain-spoken, but for once the truth about a beauty and an heiress must out—and for all her loveliness, and the upward cast of her beautiful eyes, we have before us a very ordinary and sadly unromantic girl, who only knew what she could not help knowing, and whose crass ignorance on every subject outside the range of her own daily life, would have petrified a school inspector.

It was Lady Harborough's private opinion that

only the daughters of very great ladies could afford to be thought clever and cultivated.

"Oh, if she doesn't care for it;" said Jonathan, who had hinted at a better education. Even he had been somewhat surprised at the hash his fine niece made of a French letter which he had produced on one occasion. He had business dealings with French houses.

Mary, however, disposed of the letter without hesitation. She could not read it, but no other girls of her set could.

And she owned frankly she did not care for books, she did not care for pictures, she did not care for music.

"I suppose she's just taken up with her looks and her dress;" was Mrs. Mercer's conclusion.

But in this, she did my heroine injustice. Taken up with her dress she was to a certain extent, but no girl of her acquaintance, no girl perhaps in all London thought less about her appearance than did Mary Harborough.

Will any of her plainer sisters believe this? Sophy Gill's heart sank within her when Mary walked in at the door. Sophy had for hours been dressing and re-dressing; changing this and that; worrying over her hair; wondering if she should

be in her hat, or out of it, if she should be in house-attire, or affect to have just come in from the garden?

The day proving wet and cold despite Sir Patrick's prognostications, the expedition to Oban had been abandoned by the ladies, and Jonathan had found himself obliged to tell what took him there in a piteous deluge.

Towards evening, the sky cleared, however, and the yacht could be discerned as far off as Lismore, steaming gaily home, wind and tide with her.

"It is almost a pity we didn't go," said Mrs. Mercer, who was a fair sailor.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sophy, who was a bad one. "The yacht is tossing a good deal," appended she, presently.

"Poor thing! She won't like it;" Mrs. Mercer looked from the window over the white-capped sea. "And coming on the top of her journey too. Perhaps she'll want to go to her room at once. You ordered a fire, Sophy?"

Sophy nodded. The yacht was rounding the headland.

Now she could see figures on the deck. Now bustle, now the slowing of the motion, the stop-

page, the lowering of the boat, two female figures being assisted down the side—“You have good eyes, my dear;” Mrs. Mercer, glasses and all, was still glad to be told precisely what was going on—“and now, now you can see for yourself,” cried her informant, as the boat with rapid strokes approached the landing place. “She’s sitting with uncle Jonathan in the stern, and her maid is on his other side. And there’s her luggage piled up in the bow——” the speaker broke off suddenly. “What a delightful lot of luggage!” murmured she to herself.

Oh, to be going about with a maid, and a lot of luggage, and to have everybody fussing over you, and making things pleasant for you, and taking it as a compliment your coming! Mr. Mercer would never have undertaken a wet, rough crossing, risking a night of rheumatism after it, on her account. Mrs. Mercer would not have altered the dinner hour; though she might have remembered fires in the bedrooms. There was a deference about their present preparations which extended even to the post-bag, and kept it hanging in the hall beyond its usual time, in case Miss Harborough might care to communicate with her mother.

"If I married that Puddock, post-bags would wait for me too," meditated Sophy.

Then Mary Harborough emerged to view, clad in a long, light, travelling coat. "I could have a coat like that," thought Sophy.

The new-comer looked up at the windows and waved her hand.

"And I should wave my hand, and march up as if the whole place belonged to me, and take Mr. Mercer by the arm, and pat Bruno—heigho! how nice it would be," with a half sigh. "But anyhow I'm glad she's come;" recovering. "As there are only we two, she must be friends; and——"

"And here is Miss Sophy," said her host bustling in—Mrs. Mercer had been met in the hall. "You see, you have not only the old folks to depend upon; and—and Losca Castle and all that it contains is very much at your service, my dear. Sophy—my niece, Miss Harborough."

It is impossible to describe the pride with which he said it, the ease with which she accepted it. A thousand miles could not more effectually have separated the two thus addressed, than the simple words "Sophy" and "My niece, Miss Harborough."

CHAPTER VI

A MEETING IN THE WILDS

“**I** MET Sir Patrick Kinellan;” said Mary, coming into the dining-room, where the other three were assembled for luncheon on the following day. “Am I late?” looking round. “I’m so sorry;” seating herself, and beginning to pull off her gloves. “I went to explore, you know; you promised that I should explore all by myself, uncle; so I thought I might as well begin at once, and the very first thing I explored was—Sir Patrick. Yes, please, some pheasant.”

And the heavens did not fall!

Not once had the name that was in everybody’s mind crossed a single lip since the arrival of the day before.

By a kind of tacit consent all reference to Sir Patrick Kinellan had been avoided, and though he had by this time come to figure so largely in

the thoughts both of Mr. Mercer and his wife, to say nothing of Sophy, that it had seemed once or twice as if he must be just mentioned if no more, an extraordinary reluctance curbed the utterances of all three.

Mr. Mercer did indeed once go so far as to murmur an indistinct allusion to a 'bachelor neighbour,' starting guiltily as he did so—but either the phrase escaped notice, or excited no curiosity. Mary was busy with a peach, and gave it her entire attention.

Again, during the evening Mrs. Mercer, apologising for the absence of gaiety in their surroundings, found herself assuring her niece that a fortnight before they had been gay enough.

"Were you?" said Mary, indifferently. Privately she was congratulating herself. What had she not escaped?

"And never even to ask who we were gay with!" mentally exclaimed Sophy Gill, whom such indifference puzzled and awed. "I wonder what she will say when she comes to hear about The Puddock! I do wish—I do *wish*——" she almost felt she hated The Puddock.

"Yes, fancy meeting a man I know, the first thing in the wilds!" ran on the speaker, for be

it remembered, she had only stopped to nod towards the pheasant, "and the funny thing was that *he* didn't know *me*;" looking round for astonishment. "He called me 'Miss Arthur'—it isn't unlike 'Harborough,' the sound isn't. I remembered afterwards that he had called me 'Miss Arthur' all the day we spent together. It was a river day, and there were a lot of people. Well, when I saw him now, I said 'Hollo, Sir Patrick!' for I knew him in a second, and I do think it was rather sharp of me, considering I never saw him afterwards, and it is months ago. quite early in the season it was,—but I assure you, uncle Jo, he nearly had a fit:" laughing at the recollection, as she helped herself to potatoes.

"And when he found I was your niece," continued she,——

"How did you never tell us you knew him?" Mr. Mercer had planted a heavy hand upon the table on either side of his plate; and with a frown upon his brow, put the interrogation as a judge might ask a criminal what he had to say before the black cap was put on.

Mrs. Mercer was breathing rapidly at the other end of the table, and Sophy the picture of self-consciousness, blushed all over.

"I think it is very strange you should never have told us you knew Sir Patrick," proceeded Jonathan, solemnly.

"Is it? Let me see. Why didn't I? I'm sure I can't imagine;" contentedly eating away.

"You knew he lived here."

"No, that I didn't. Stop a bit though, I believe I did."

"On this very island. Within four miles of this house,——"

"But I forgot, uncle. And I didn't know about the miles, anyway."

"Forgot? All this time?" said Jonathan, incredulously. His own memory was as dependable as a rock.

"You can't call it 'All this time,'" pleaded she. "I saw the man once; and he thought I was 'Miss Arthur'; so he was worse than I anyhow," laughing again.

"But did he not tell you Kinellan was near Losca?" persisted her uncle, reddening a little. Perhaps Sir Patrick had not cared to mention the fact.

"Oh, he might—but I don't see why he should. He knew nothing about me and Losca. Don't you see he thought I was 'Miss Arthur,' (this

had stuck by her) and what had a 'Miss Arthur' to do with a Mr. Mercer?" merrily. "We just met and made friends, as people in London do, for the day. I remember he was awfully gone on me—his 'Miss Arthur.'"

"You ought to have told him your name;" said Jonathan, surlily. "I've no notion of girls liking to be called by wrong names." His sense of honesty was affronted; and besides, was there not a certain disrespect towards Miss Harborough, the great Miss Harborough, conveyed in her being thus unrecognised and undistinguished?

"Well, I never said I liked it, uncle;" said the beauty, placidly. "I couldn't stop it, you know."

"You—couldn't stop it?" He was more and more surprised.

"Oh, no. No, I couldn't." Mary shook her head. Then, as he still stared at her, open-mouthed. "It would have spoilt the joke, you know;" she explained.

"Pon my word I—do *you* see the joke, ma'am?" Suddenly Mr. Mercer appealed to his wife, his look saying "Ought I not to be angry? Are you angry?"

Had it been any one but Mary he would have

been angry on the spot; for a millionaire is a millionaire, and it is not seemly that indignity should be offered to any one connected with him, of which indignity Sir Patrick had surely, if unconsciously, been guilty—but as it was, he was uneasily anxious to be backed up.

“Eh? Do *you* see it?” he repeated.

A new voice, however, intervened. “Why, I see it,” cried Sophy Gill, shrilly. “I think it must have been splendid. Do tell us the rest? Did he call you ‘Miss Arthur’ to-day? And did you call him——”

“Hoots—nonsense!” said Jonathan, gruffly, his temper was now roused. “I beg your pardon, Miss Sophy, but you must excuse my saying that I know the ways of the world a little better than you do”—for the life of him he could not help a slight accentuation on the ‘You’—“and I think, begging your pardon next, Mary, that you were—were—that it was a bit of foolishness——”

“I daresay, but it made a joke.” Mary nodded at him. “You don’t know how thankful we are for anything in the shape of a joke, in Town; we simply scream at nothing. Whenever Sir Patrick said ‘Miss Arthur’ the girls screamed to each other,”

“What girls were they, my dear?” Mrs. Mercer saw a hope of diverting the argument, and seized upon it.

“The De Vesci girls, aunt. Lord De Vesci is something or other to Sir Patrick.”

“And he was staying with them?” The old lady glanced at her husband whose opinion of the screaming girls would now have to be re-considered. It was obvious that he had been on the brink of delivering it.

“I don’t know;” said Mary, indifferently. “They brought him; but I don’t know where they picked him up.”

“I thought you said he was a relation?”

“Some one said so. I don’t know.” The cross - examination was beginning to bore her.

“But mayn’t we hear about to-day?” murmured Sophy, in subdued accents. She had been snubbed, but she could stand snubbing; and she was dying to know, not whether an old bygone mistake was funny or not, but what Sir Patrick had said that day, how he had looked, what Mary had thought of him, and in particular if anything about herself had passed between the two?

If people would ramble off to other points, how was she ever to get this out of Mary?

But now was her time; the old people were obviously impressed, and their questions at a standstill, while a shade of impatience which had manifested itself upon the brow of their niece told its own tale. She had come in full of narration and it had been nipped in the bud,—what narrator would not resent this?

Moreover Mary had a lively tongue and was used to the run of it; it was the one bond between her and her mother that there was frank, unrestrained intercourse between them, and that even when they differed, not to say bickered on occasion, they had it out, as the saying is, and nothing rankled.

“Do let me tell my tale;” was therefore plainly written now on our young lady’s face, and Sophy saw it and sympathised with it. Accordingly; her “Mayn’t we hear?” breathed across the table, came at the right moment and took instant effect.

“I had got to I don’t know where,” said Mary; “I just followed my nose, and went straight on away from here. It didn’t matter where, I said to myself; I’ll go where the road goes. It appears there is only one road——”

“Did you expect a dozen?” The interruption of course was Jonathan’s.

“Now, uncle, do be quiet. You have banged into me enough already, and if you don’t let me alone, I’ll come round and hit you. No, of course I didn’t expect a dozen, but there’s a difference between a dozen and one. However, it’s a good road, though I thought it would never end——”

“Naturally, as it runs round the island.”

“There you are again! You won’t be quiet, sir?” threatening to rise. “A plate at your head will be the next thing;” seizing one.

He apologised, and she proceeded.

“On and on I went—yes, I know you’re going to say something but you’d better not, plate’s coming if you do—and at last after a terrific hill—plate sir, plate—when I had struggled to the top and was dead-beat, what did I behold to make me forget all my woes and toils, but”—she paused and cast her eyes round on each in turn—“Guess,” she cried.

“I suppose you saw the lodge gates of Kinellan House?” observed Mrs. Mercer, demurely.

“Lodge gates? Nothing of the kind. Stop, though. I might have seen them; I saw them

afterwards. But anyhow they're not what I mean. Guess, again."

"You saw the sea on the other side, if your hill is the hill it ought to be," said her uncle. "By the fuss you make about it——"

"Plate, sir. Take care. *I* make a fuss? Any one would have made a fuss. The sea? Well, I daresay I did see the sea—but the sea's no catch, there's plenty of the sea about. Now you guess," to Sophy. "Third time's lucky. You'll hit the mark."

"You saw Sir Patrick Kinellan," quoth Sophy, promptly, having divined as much all along.

"Hum! You had nothing left but Sir Pat. I ought not to have given you the lead over. There he was. At first, though, I only saw it was a man. A man! And I hadn't met a soul since I started. I would have spoken to that man if he had been a wild man of the woods, or the man in the moon——"

"Bet you would;" muttered Jonathan, a little vexed with her.

She was letting herself down, he thought. Miss Mary Harborough should have gathered up her skirts as she passed a stranger, held to the other side of the road, kept her eyes front, and her lips

pursed. He was beginning to understand as he had never done before, sundry hints let fall by Mary's mother in the old days.

"So you ran full tilt at Sir Patrick?" said he, eyeing her.

"Full tilt, indeed. As soon as I saw who it was, my nice little man who called me 'Miss Arthur' I jumped right up into the air. It was such fun. I daresay if I had met him at Hom-burg, or Rome, or even at Cairo, I shouldn't have bothered to remember him—there would have been no need, you know—you may or you mayn't, just as you like—if a man has bored you, all you've to do is to look blank at him, and ten to one he won't have the pluck to introduce himself again,—it's all right, uncle, every one does it,—but if you *want* to know him, you can call out as I did 'Hollo,' and then he understands at once."

"Queer things, London manners."

"Plate, sir. Don't abuse London manners. They're my manners, and I'm your niece. You let my London manners alone. They went down with Sir Pat anyway."

No one at Losca ever called Sir Patrick 'Sir Pat.'

"How do you know they went down with

him?" (More likely your pretty face went down with him!)

"He was happy to meet, sorry to part, and would be very very happy to meet again," cried she, gaily. "I'm awfully witty to-day. Sophy's quite struck with me."

'Sophy' and 'Mary' had been arranged the night before. "It's no use holding a girl at arms length with a fortnight of her and no one else, before you," decided the latter; "Sophy," continued she now, "I'll make you a present of all these clever sayings. They're not my own, my dear, so you may as well have them after me as not. There'll be a Clearance Sale the day I leave, and you can get the lot at an overwhelming reduction. There I am again. That's the last phrase of the sales—'Overwhelming reductions.' And I say, aunt," turning to her, "what do you think the 'Overwhelming reductions' in Bond Street amounted to? Just double the ordinary price in any other part?"

"I don't wonder at Sir Patrick's being pleased to meet you," drily interrupted Mr. Mercer. "You'd be a perfect god-send to a man like him."

"What do you mean, uncle?" colouring a little.

“A chatterbox and a—mute.”

“Mute? He’s not a mute. He’s a little dear. And if I am a chatterbox I seem to have come to the right place”—then checking herself, “if you don’t wish me to talk, you might have said so before. I thought you liked it. You used to like it.”

“Well, well;” said he, peaceably.

“Well, well? What do you mean by ‘Well, well’? Am I to be quiet, or am I not? I can hold my tongue as well as other people——”

“I doubt it, Mary.”

“And he wouldn’t like you to do it, either, Mary.” The quick interposition was his wife’s. “Your uncle is only teasing. He loves to be waked up. And we are old-fashioned people, and sleepy. Poor Sophy has had a dull time of it lately with only us two; and I’m sure none of us would like you to hold your tongue, my dear;” reaching out a hand to pat the other hand.

The other hand turned round and clasped it.

“I felt quite savage,” said Mary, looking at her aunt with soft, beautiful eyes. “There’s only one thing that really makes me savage, and it’s to be called a chatterbox. I felt as savage as a bear.”

("Good Lord!" whispered Jonathan to himself.
"A bear!")

"Well, what said Sir Patrick to the bear?"
inquired he, withdrawing his gaze.

"We shall get to it at last!" muttered Sophy Gill.

"Sir Patrick? Oh," said Mary, starting afresh,
"Sir Patrick simply howled for joy. I suppose
nothing like it had ever happened in his life before.
His eyes were like saucers by the time I got within
range; and when I said 'Hollo!' he had off his
cap, or whatever you call it, and showed his nice,
thick, curly hair, and—and—let me see, where
was I?"

"Where Sir Patrick howled for joy," said her
uncle, gravely.

"And stuttered and stammered. But I say, he
does look awfully well in a kilt. It's an enormous
improvement——"

("What must he look like out of it?" Internal
comment on the part of Sophy.)

"I've seen lots of men in the kilt," proceeded
the narrator, "but only a few of them know how
to wear it. I know—though I'm only a girl, and
an English one. But there are some Macdonalds
we know, whose brothers are all kilties directly

they are at their own place ; and we've stayed there ; and they told me about it. They look awfully handsome in their kilts."

"Do they?" ejaculated Sophy, drinking it in.

("But we can't have a mere Macdonald brother for you," reflected Jonathan.)

Aloud: "So you thought Sir Patrick — he's not considered much to look at about here — but you thought——?"

"I thought he looked very nice. As broad as he's long—and so strong looking. A little Highland bull. All that dark, curly hair on his forehead too. And isn't he burnt? I never saw such a colour."

"Now that I think of it, Sir Patrick certainly is very brown and red," said Mrs. Mercer. "It's the outdoor life he leads ; but I don't think it unbecoming."

"We jabbered away at each other as fast as we could speak—at least I did, while he stood with his cap in his hand. Does he always stand with his cap in his hand when you meet him?"

"Does he?" said Mrs. Mercer, looking at her husband.

"Not to me;" said he, grinning.

Then both looked at Sophy, but Sophy said nothing. She knew in her heart that he had not to her either.

“I expect he was rather dumb-foundered,” said Mary, lightly; “it was surprising, you know. There we were, with miles and miles of nobody and nothing on both sides; and he had only seen me in all the hurly-burly of the river, and——”

“And as ‘Miss Arthur’?”

“Oh, I soon put that right,” said she. “I said ‘Come now, Sir Patrick, haven’t you found out by this time? Why, we were all laughing at you.’ He didn’t seem to see that there was anything to laugh at.”

“You told him who you were?”

“And I said I had come here to stay, and all the rest of it.”

“He showed you Kinellan?”

“Where it was; and the gates you,” to her aunt, “spoke about. There wasn’t time to go further. He promised to invite us though; for I fished for it. I told him I knew Selina—I didn’t say I was thankful she wasn’t here—but I asked after her with decent civility; and when he regretted that I had not come during her visit—I don’t believe he was regretting a bit in his

heart, but he had to pretend—somehow between us we managed to make out that I could get inside the old house, even without that horrid little woman's help."

"You don't like her, then?"

"Can't stand her, uncle,—ugh!"

"And we have dined there since she left;" chimed in Mrs. Mercer, on the fidget to say it. "And I'm sure I for one enjoyed my dinner ever so much more than when I had to sit up with that proud-looking little minx afterwards. The way she looks at us all, over the top of her cheeks, as if we were the dirt of the earth!"

But this would never do. "Hut—nonsense. Mary will think she has been rude to you." Jonathan, with a frown at his wife, glanced towards his niece, who smiled cheerfully.

"I daresay she was. She wouldn't be Selina Kinellan if she weren't. Selina is a little horror; I won't have her at any price. She truckles to mother, and sits in her pocket, because she likes to drive with us to Hurlingham and lunch at our table at 'Lord's,' but——"

"She never let on to me that she knew you;" exclaimed he, wondering what next?

"That's her slyness. She wanted to be nasty

to you here, so she kept it dark that she cringes to us in Town. I say, uncle Jo, if she knew that you run us——”

“Never mind—never mind,” said he, hastily. This would never do for Sophy’s ears.

“Wouldn’t she have wheeled about sharp?” said Mary, laughing, “oh, I don’t mind her hearing——” loud enough for every one to hear. “And you trust me to take it out of Selina, next time I get the chance. She won’t give me a chance if she can help it. You see, we only meet in the season; and then we talk of nothing but what is on that day or the day before; and it’s nothing to us who’s who—out of Town, at least—it’s only a few of the very, very wily ones who look ahead, and remember that there will be people to meet and places to go to when London’s over. My mother does; and I suppose other mothers do; but we girls never think of it.”

(“You would though, if you were poor, and glad to go anywhere,” thought poor Sophy, jealously.)

“You’re just a spoilt thing,” said Jonathan, aloud. Her simplicity, artlessness, and inconsequence puzzled him. She would not be ‘fine,’ she would not be ‘grand,’ he could not get her to patronise Sophy and keep her at a distance,—

and yet she talked—how easily, how pleasantly she talked—of ‘taking it out’ of the haughty, impertinent Mrs. Kinellan, who had had it all her own way so far, and against whom he and his felt powerless.

He began to perceive something in all this beyond his ken.

It would not, however, do to let this appear. “Well, I suppose Sir Patrick was at your mercy;” proceeded he, after a pause. “If you had made up your mind to get inside Kinellan, he wouldn’t be able to keep you out?”

“Rather not. If I couldn’t boss him I should be ashamed. But as it happens, he does not want to keep me out—not by any manner of means. His little hospitable soul swelled with rapture when I said I was coming to look him up——”

“Gracious, Mary!” Mary’s aunt felt her head whirling round.

“So I am, dear—with you, of course. We’re all going. He is coming over to ask us;—I told him not to mind, for that I would take a message—but he *would* come. That was his manners, dear little gentleman.”

“When is he coming?” inquired Mrs. Mercer.

“Some time to-day. But I told him I didn’t know if we should be in, and he must take his chance. Of course I couldn’t answer for you, and I had an idea of something else for myself. Sophy, there is going to be a tremendously low tide, let’s go down, and wade, and look for things? When I was at Glengyllachan—such a jolly place in Skye—we went there one year about this time—no, it wasn’t this time, but it was some time—and there were ‘Spring tides’ as they called them. Funny, wasn’t it? ‘Spring tides,’ and I know it was autumn! For of course no one goes to the Highlands except in the autumn:—anyhow there were the tides, and there was me, and it was very perfectly glorious. I was out morning, noon, and night. I just lived on that shore; and you never saw anything like the things I brought in.”

“What sort of things?” She was so pretty and so animated, and there was something so fresh and wholesome and natural in her gay prattle, that all the vexation with which her uncle had hearkened at the outset, was fast dying out of his breast, while the old pride and affection were in full force. His own eyes brightened as they reflected something of the sparkling light in hers.

"I daresay they did not amount to much," said she: "I threw them away afterwards,—but they were perfect darlings at the time. It was the hunting for them that I liked. The wading and slipping about on the great sea-weedy rocks, and the runs over the sand between. And there were heaps and heaps of shells. Great shining shells; and then such little, tiny ones! Every sort of pink and yellow, some of them were,—but I liked the white ones best. I kept *them* for ever so long. Then I gave them to a hospital—so you see they did some good, uncle. I promised to get some more too, so now's the chance; Sophy, we'll get a lot. We'll simply get buckets full; and I can take them back with me. I never thought of it till now——"

"Forgot your promise, did you, miss?"

"Why, yes, uncle. I couldn't help forgetting, could I? There are such lots of things to remember. But sometimes I wish I did not live in London," said Mary, thoughtfully; "for then I should not have things crowded out as they are now."

"People do tell me that of London," began her aunt in confirmation.

"Oh, it's true, aunt; indeed it is. I shouldn't

be half such a giddy-goat if I lived anywhere else. And I like other places just as well, or better. When I'm away from it all, I never want to go back ; at least I suppose I should like a little bit of a rush every now and then in the season——”

“The season must be splendid,” cried Sophy, irrepressibly. “I would give anything in the world to go to London in the season.”

Miss Harborough glanced at her, opened her lips, and shut them again, but a half smile played upon their corners. For a moment she was back in her own set, and looking at poor Sophy Gill through the reverse end of the telescope.

“I'm glad to see you can amuse yourself out of London at any rate ;” said Mr. Mercer, rising from the table.

It never occurred to him to wait for any one when he had finished what was on his own plate ; and as he had done but little talking he had eaten all he wanted some time before, and only lingered because sufficiently well entertained.

But now he pushed back his chair and addressed his niece in parting accents. “I suppose it was Sir Patrick who told you about the tide ? He is great on weather and tides, and your aunt pins her faith upon him. But I daresay we

might have been able to know without consulting him, that considering the tide was up to the top of the shingle this morning, it will be down as far as it can go this afternoon. I may *sometimes* be able to tell you a thing or two of that sort if you ask me, Mary."

"I'll ask you ; no fears, uncle. Are you coming with us?"

He promised to go another time.

CHAPTER VII

A WHITE PARASOL

KINELLAN HOUSE, deep set in a rugged glen, and fronting a lonely western sea as its only outlook, was not perhaps the most desirable spot in the world to fall back upon supposing one to have met with a buffet from Fate in any of its varied shapes.

Yet thither returned, straight as an arrow to its mark, a man who in the full efflorescence of the year, when all the world was in its glory, had learned for the first time in his life what it was to have the deep and hitherto dumb chords of his being, struck, and struck in vain.

For many years Sir Patrick Kinellan had pursued the even tenor of his way contentedly enough. Dwelling among his own people, making their interests his, finding sufficient

occupation in the management of his estate, and recreation in hobbies of one kind and another, he never consciously found the time long nor the days dull; while it only needed the memory of a thwarted, cramped, and unhappy childhood, joined to the sight of his brother's conjugal infelicity, to make him hug himself in his present freedom from every disturbing influence.

He now no longer dreaded to speak lest he should be chidden. The habit of silence, it is true, had gained upon him; having had its seeds sown in days when to put forward an opinion was to be sharply corrected, or sarcastically quoted—but, perhaps because of the very fact that his words were few, they were listened to with even more respect than those of most other men; and it was not only his own dependents and retainers who waited deferentially when it was seen that Sir Patrick Kinellan was about to speak.

Moreover he was not merely esteemed, he was beloved. When one is beloved one cannot help knowing it. Sir Patrick, go where he would, never felt himself an intruder; never saw a shadow cross the brow at his approach; never saw the school-children who streamed over the

road, playing games as they went, gather together and whisper as they passed him.

Instead, they would boldly place themselves in his way, grinning into his face; and the saluting and bobbing would go on *con amore* all the time he was addressing, as he invariably did address, the favoured ones.

It was only the most villainous poacher on the place who sneaked out of sight if the laird came by, and of Lachlan Maclachlan the following tale is still told.

Sir Patrick, out on the prowl for evil spirits, and with Lachy specially in view on one dark, tempestuous night, had sighted that worthy at his nefarious trade, and started in hot pursuit. Lachy, albeit fleeter of foot, being heavily weighted with plunder, might have been overtaken, indeed Sir Patrick already saw him within his triumphant grasp, when a branch caught the latter's foot, and he fell with a crash.

The poacher heard the crash, and saw his landlord—for he was one of Sir Patrick's own tenants—lie motionless. In another moment he was back, and by the side of the fallen figure.

On regaining consciousness, for he had been momentarily stunned, the laird found himself

being tenderly cared for and his hurts anxiously investigated.

"Ye're no hurt? Are ye hurt? Stop a wee,—” Some whisky was poured cannily down his throat. "Oo, Sir Pathrick,—” the big fellow was nearly blubbering, "A thocht ye wad be deid.” Hares and rabbits lay openly on the ground, unheeded.

"Let them be ;” said Lachy, calmly. "Tak ma airm. Or wull I carry ye?”

But Sir Patrick walked home, leaning on a friendly arm, and lived to resume the chase at a more convenient season. Nothing was ever said about that night's work.

"A wadna yon wee man had been hurt rinnin after me for a' the hares in Mull,” Lachy would allege, with perfect goodwill, and poached away, owing no grudge ; convinced, moreover, that none was owing on the other's part.

None of the neighbouring proprietors wintered at their Highland homes, and sorely would the 'wee man' have been missed, had he, too, betaken himself off directly the New Year set in, as did all who had not gone before then.

Sir Patrick saw the short, dark days out ; and it was only when April airs began to fan the gloomy

braes into springing life once more, that he would make his brief yearly disappearance. He would pay a few visits, see a race or two run, and wind up with London, where one June day, in the year of which we write, he underwent the experience which was to affect his whole future life.

How little it was to *her*—how much to *him* !

A London girl, taking a day off in the midst of her whirl, glad to breathe the pure air of the country after a late ball, and even while gazing on green pastures and still waters eagerly fitting in the future pieces of the feverish panorama with companions equally athirst for the fray, equally resolute not to let a drop be left undrunk of pleasure's cup—what to the giddy young creature with the world hemming her in at every point, pleading for her favour, competing for her smiles, were those hours of bewildering enchantment which woke in him a new and hitherto undreamed of existence ?

Sir Patrick had been asked at the last moment to join the river party of which Mary Harborough was the *raison d'être*.

He had gone solemnly to call at Lord De Vesci's house,—he always made a point of going a round of solemn, relationly calls on first arriv-

ing in Town, and was not averse to the dinner-parties which ensued. Otherwise he spent his time much as Selina said. But dinner he took seriously, and arrived at the moment, with his card of invitation in his pocket. He had gone, we say, to the De Vescis', been admitted, and found the lady of the house alone.

She was frantically busy; notes and cards like snow bestrewed her writing table, and the carriage stood at the door,—but she started up to greet Sir Patrick, and smiled upon him.

“You are just in time. Come to my river party to-morrow.”

“To-morrow?” He had arranged nothing for to-morrow, meaning to use it in his own way, and not anticipating interference. As a rule, people did not ask him to day things.

“You must come. There is just room for one more. And we want a man. Of course you can row.”

Row? He smiled. He had won a bump for his boat at Oxford more than once.

But a river party? He cowered a little.

“Now you are not to get off. Providence has sent you here to my aid; yes, indeed, we want you awfully. I was just thinking whom I should

get. Oh, please don't think that is the only reason, for you know we really—we so seldom see you, and it is so delightful your just appearing at this moment. No, no, I can't let you off." And her ladyship glanced at the clock. Her look said "Go to-day, and come to-morrow."

"If you really are in need of me?" said Sir Patrick, feebly. Any one who was 'really in need' of anything appealed to him.

"That's a good man. That's capital. Then you'll be here at eleven—or stop, perhaps you'd better meet us at Paddington?" considering a moment. "No! decidedly no; be here, and then I shall be sure of you. You see by that, whether I am 'in need' or not," laughing. "I simply can't let you off. I feel as if I had caught a swan. Oh, I am so pleased, and I know you won't throw me over as that horrid Dashleigh boy has done. He does not know I have got Mary Harborough, or he would have thought twice before he sent this"—tearing up a note with malicious energy. "He does not care in the least for spoiling our party—rather likes doing it, I daresay—he is a perfect brute, and gives himself such airs—that was why I would not tell him Mary was coming. Only to send an excuse now!

Isn't it disgusting manners? Well, never mind, we shan't break our hearts. And dear Sir Patrick, I know *you* will be true to me, won't you?"

What could Sir Patrick say? He took out his note book, and asked her to repeat the hour at which he should be due?

"You are an angel;" cried she, enthusiastically.

Then he saw her glance at the clock again, and reach out a hand for gloves and parasol lying near.

He took the hint. "As we are to meet so soon again——?"

"Yes. Delightful. De Vesci will be so sorry to have missed you. But of course you will come and dine with us. We'll fix a day to-morrow. Good-bye. I hope it will be fine. And you won't forget? Eleven. Because we must catch the 11.40 from Paddington, and we have to meet the rest there, and that station is always so rush-about,—Good-bye." The last 'Good-bye' saw him to the door.

He was rather amused with it all.

As he walked away, he said to himself that London was a fearful place, you could not be twenty-four hours in it without finding yourself

launched on a headlong career of gaiety, whether you would or no.

Of course a river party was not like those terrible things in houses, those concerts, balls, luncheons, and teas, that Selina went to endlessly, and that he had declined, and meant to go on declining with unflinching stubbornness,—but still he thought he would say nothing to Selina of his present engagement. He would not give her a loop-hole for imagining that he was vulnerable.

On reflection he concluded not to call on his sister-in-law till the De Vesci affair was a thing of the past. The De Vescis had never been intimate with Selina, and indeed had always been of the few who preferred himself to Nigel. Nigel, the popular favourite, had in his heyday given offence here and there without a thought, from sheer heedless exuberance ; and relations are quick to see when they are little accounted of. In consequence, “Patrick is worth a dozen of that pampered brat, his brother:” had been the verdict in Chesterfield Gardens,—and Patrick thereafter had steadily held first place in the affections of all there.

And though they were not cousins with whom he could have much in common, he liked them

and felt at ease in their society. Lord De Vesci and he talked sport and agriculture and what the country was coming to; her ladyship discussed the opera, and did her best to be musical; while the younger generation to whom he was an almost unknown quantity, prattled and voted him 'A good sort.'

On the whole, the lonely man—he always felt a trifle lonely during the first few days of his London campaign—found himself insensibly cheered by the prospect of being included in a merry party, and that so soon after his arrival.

After all, when a man is in Town he ought to be doing something, and a little of the spirit of the hurrying crowds entered into his breast. He looked at his pocket-book and put it back again briskly, hailing a hansom with the other hand, for the next call on his list was in Aldford Street, and he did not quite know where Aldford Street was.

When it proved to be nearly round the corner, Sir Patrick, laughing to himself, bade the man wait; the day was hot, and be his friends out or in, he would keep the hansom, and keep himself cool.

Presently, after he had done as much as would do for that day, he began to ruminate on his attire for the morrow. . What ought it to be? Surely not frock coat and top hat? Yet if others were thus habited, how awkward to have assumed a more easy outfit. He wished he had asked Lady De Vesci. Nothing would have been simpler at the moment, but to write and worry her about such a trifle now, seemed not merely absurd, but cruel. He recollected the litter of notes on her ladyship's desk, and her distracted brow.

Should he go back to the house, and ask to see one of the men? Either father or sons would be able to give the requisite information; and though a little ashamed of the fuss he was making, he was about to give the direction when, as luck would have it, a friendly voice greeted him.

"I say," said Sir Patrick, after shaking hands warmly: "you can tell me. What does one wear at a river party? I have to go to one to-morrow:" with a flash of pride—it seemed so smart and fashionable, so entirely the thing to be doing, that he felt his friend must wonder how an odd-looking country body like him came to be

having such a fine engagement—"and I have never been to a thing of the sort in my life," he concluded, truthfully.

"Straw hat and an ordinary suit," Colonel Marx did not look as if any very remarkable statement had been made. "Jolly on the river on a day like this."

"Not this sort of rig, then?" Sir Patrick glanced down at himself.

"Oh dear, no. Be broiled alive. Nice cool morning suit, the coolest you've got."

"I see. And—and how do you get there?" This had been puzzling him.

"You're not going with the people?" said the colonel, internally commenting: "Gad, I wouldn't fag down unless I were taken in tow by the people themselves."

Sir Patrick however explained.

"You *are* going with them?" said Marx.

"Yes, to be sure. I am to be at the house at eleven. I was only wondering, my cousin said something about 'Paddington station' and I—to tell the truth, I always supposed," laughing, "that the Thames ran through London."

"Ha—ha—ha! So you wanted to get on board a penny boat, with a blind fiddler, and toot

—toot—toot from side to side, cheek-by-jowl with all the East End, up to Kew, eh?”

“Well I did that once, and enjoyed it very much,” said Sir Patrick. “That was what made me wonder about Paddington. I thought it might be some other river Lady De Vesci meant.”

“Lady De Vesci? It’s her party? Oh, no; it’s no other river;” amused. “There’s only one ‘river’ for us Londoners. So that’s your party? Lady De Vesci’s? Another fellow I know is going. At least he was, but he’s chucked it——”

“I am going in his place.”

“Awfully good of you. They’re lucky to get you. The De Vescis are all very well—nice people, and all that—but they are so frightfully energetic. They expect you to go for a regular tremender of a day, and to row like blazes. And they never come back till the last train. So Bobby Dashleigh says. That’s why he won’t go. Says his constitution won’t stand it.”

“Well, mine will,” said Sir Patrick, manfully. “And I am accustomed to rowing in all weathers.” He was not going to be daunted. “So now that I know what to go in, I shall be all right. Look me up and dine with me, will you?”

"Two engagements already," said he to himself, as the two parted.

The next thing was to get a straw hat. "Lincoln and Bennett's," said our country cousin, who always went to the best places; and once more he ensconced himself in his hansom—(by this time he was on the friendliest terms with the driver, who took him long rounds to places close by, and mentally doubled the length of every halt, with an instinctive conviction that he would get whatever he asked)—and at Lincoln and Bennett's, "Now then, what is it?" said the gentleman, looking up from the pavement.

"Seven and six;" said the man with a gulp.

"And there's a shilling for yourself;" said Sir Patrick.

For many a day thereafter, Cabby kept his eye open for a short, broad figure, with the kindly face, "and the benev'lent 'art," as he said to himself. "Wish us pore fellers could 'appen on more o' his sort:" and he told the tale in Cabbys' shelters, mournfully shaking his head and wiping his mouth with unction.

So that more eyes than his were presently on the stretch for the burly little baronet, and he

little knew why every now and then a 'prowler' would keep by his side persistently as he walked along, or draw up at the corner of the pavement with anxious expectation, all on the *qui vive* if he happened to pause and consider, before a crowded crossing.

Once Sir Patrick knew what he had to do, there was no fear that he would not do it. Colonel Marx had told him what to wear, and Lady De Vesci where and when to come,—so that though he felt somewhat as if he were setting foot upon a foreign soil without any very clear idea of the language, the sense of subdued exhilaration was still upon him when he stepped down the broad staircase of his hotel, and saw the cool hall, filled with pleasure-seekers like himself. He had wondered for a moment if he should look odd going out at that hour from that place in a straw hat? Hitherto he had always gone about most punctiliously in correct London garb.

But it did not appear that anything was correct, or incorrect. All were attired to suit their several requirements, and a man of his own age—a man, too, with looks and a fine bearing—sauntered past ere he had been two minutes down, in a suit the fac-simile of his own. He

experienced a thrill of elation, and gave no further thought to his appearance.

Shall we weary our readers if we give a glimpse of the day which followed, from point to point?

At first it was all confusion, greetings, arrangements. Who was to go with whom? Who had railway tickets, and who had not? Where were the baskets and wraps? Then Sir Patrick had got into the wrong carriage with quite inferior people, and must be hauled out and bundled in next door, and could not for the life of him tell why.

“The idea of letting him go with *them*!” Her ladyship looked daggers at the unoffending satellites, who had done nothing to deserve contumely, having only seen a quiet little gentleman standing humbly in the back-ground and, meaning to be civil, indicated a vacant seat in their midst.

Lady De Vesci, however, had her wits about her. She might dismiss her country cousin rather too palpably when he called at an unlucky moment, but she not only knew what Sir Patrick as Sir Patrick was entitled to, but, looking upon him as the saviour of her party, and the man

who, bidden at the eleventh hour, had obeyed her command without a demur or a pretence, she was resolute that he should be treated handsomely.

Accordingly he travelled down with herself and—Mary Harborough.

A reason for this was given him, but he never could recollect what it was, even when conning over the events of the day, as he did, ah, how often !

He was presented to Miss Arthur. (For convenience sake, we will for the present call her what Sir Patrick did.)

Miss Arthur sat beside her hostess, a tall, fair, glowing girl, in the freshest of white frocks, with a foam of lace about her throat. Her broad-brimmed hat was also trimmed with white ; her complexion could stand it.

“ You don’t look a bit the worse for your balls, Mary,” Lady De Vesci having now got everybody on board and nothing left behind, could afford to be genial and expansive. “ Sir Patrick, Miss Arthur”—(that was what he thought she said, and bowed, recognising an introduction)—“ goes to everything, and looks—my dear, did you see that poor Lilian Birch? Upon my word, that girl will kill herself ; I really could not have

her in here. It would have made me miserable to be sitting opposite to her."

"She looked just as bad last night," said Mary. "Lily's not strong, you know."

"Not like you, or my girls. But they don't do as much as you. Flo would not go last night; she said it would knock her up for to-day."

"Did Gerty enjoy herself?"

"Immensely. I haven't had time to hear about it, but I know she said 'Immensely.' An aunt took her;" explained her ladyship, for Sir Patrick's benefit.

"It's so jolly that there is nothing on to-night," said Mary. "Mother wanted me to come back, and go to the Scoresbys'. But I said 'Not if I know it,'"—laughing merrily.

"Dear me, no. The Scoresbys'? That's a concert, isn't it? Your mother is going? I wish I had known. I would have asked her to take—but it is too late now. Don't let us think about those troublesome things. Let us give ourselves up to—oh, Mary, have those tiresome Owen people asked you? They are simply pestering everybody to go to them, and I suppose we shall have to give in. I believe it is a wonderful house."

"Lady De Vesci, will you take me to the Holland House garden party?"

Off they started again, while Sir Patrick sat still and listened.

This kind of thing was new to him ; but it was not because it was new that he quietly faced the speakers instead of turning his head aside, and gazing from the window as the train flew along. The three were alone, as it chanced ; others who should have come in with them, having found seats elsewhere in the hurry of departure ; so that there was no one to whom conversation was due, while, at the same time, it could not be supposed that anything now passing between the ladies was not meant for the gentleman to hear. He was free to look interested and attentive—that meant he was free to let his eyes rest on Miss Arthur's beautiful face.

What a face it was ! At once so fair, so bright, so busy—if such a term could be applied. Her parted lips seemed made to smile. Youth and happiness irradiated from every feature.

"My dear, you have added another victim to your list ;" Lady De Vesci lingered for a whisper and a significant glance, ere she hurried along the platform, when the brief journey was over ; and

Mary was told to stand where she was, and Sir Patrick to take charge of her, while the party was being collected and marshalled.

He resolved to stick like a leech.

Perhaps she saw it—perhaps she liked it. At any rate, he had her shawl to carry, and once when an eager aspirant came between the two, Miss Arthur coolly stepped back a pace.

“I believe I am under your wing,” said she, beaming friendly encouragement upon her late travelling companion. Whereat the other man, looking Sir Patrick up and down, shrugged his shoulders unafraid. It was only ‘a bit of bluff,’ he thought.

Sir Patrick, however, felt more than ever in luck’s way. She had said it—it had not merely been said to her. He hugged the shawl closer; wild horses would not have torn it from him.

They walked down to the river side by side. Sir Patrick felt free to do so. He knew no one of the party but his hosts, and they were too much engrossed to require attention. Flo, whose own affairs were all right, gave him a smile, and exchanged a passing congratulation “What a perfect day!”—Gerty, who was not equally

prosperous, evaded her elderly cousin, fearful lest he should attach himself where another was still expected, still anxiously hoped for.

Miss Arthur, perfectly disengaged, and apparently as willing to talk to him as any one else, found the persistent little figure always at her elbow, and when he had handed her into his boat, he smiled for the first time. Up till then he had been too anxious.

He pulled stroke. That meant he was close to the ladies in the stern.

And of these there were only two, Sir Patrick having been relegated to one of the smaller boats; for Lady De Vesci, having no one in view for her heiress now that Lord Robert Dashleigh had failed—for whom she had projected the match, Bobby being poor, and his people wild to get him provided for—"Would be *usefully* grateful for ever," her ladyship had reflected)—this little scheme having fallen through, we say, its baffled projector was very well pleased to please her kinsman; and whether anything came of it or not, let him bask awhile in beauty's smiles, unmolested.

The aspirant who had tried to oust Sir Patrick on the station platform, and who was now

furtively sneaking towards the little boat, was summarily ordered off, and harnessed to a team, which, to his angry mind, had all that was cheap and nasty on board.

"Isn't Mr. Monson savage?" whispered Mary. Then demurely, "He would have liked a nice, easy boat to row, you know."

Sir Patrick laughed with pleasure.

The sun was hot upon his head, and smote upon the back of his neck fiercely; but once he had tucked a handkerchief inside his straw hat and let it fall over his shoulders—Mary noted the handkerchief, it was so old-fashioned in its size, but of the finest, purest cambric—he drew his long strokes with an ease that made the slim boy at his back envious.

"I say, you can row; and you don't get a bit hot, neither." Poor Neddy—it was Neddy De Vesci, a clerk in the Foreign Office—panted as he spoke, while great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead.

"You are out of condition, I daresay?" suggested Sir Patrick, good-naturedly.

"I don't know. Yes. Perhaps I am. I—don't often—get a day—off," jerkily drawing breaths between the words.

"There's no need to pull so hard;" suggested Mary, pitying him.

"And I think," appended the 'Stroke,' who perceived that he was the only one in the boat who knew anything about it, "that perhaps if you"—addressing Miss Arthur, who held the tiller ropes, "would steer a little closer to the bank we should not have the stream quite so strong against us. If you notice, the other boats——" he hinted.

"Why, of course; now why did you not tell me that before, Sir Patrick?"

Sir Patrick smiled weakly.

"You knew all the time that I was giving you double work, but you would not correct me, because I was so conceited as to fancy I knew all about it; that was quite the *preux chevalier*," cried Mary, delighted. "I daresay but for Neddy you would have tugged away without a remonstrance the whole afternoon. There, is that right? Are we close enough now?"

They were so close and so well out of the stream that scarcely half the exertion was needed, and Sir Patrick, to whom the exercise was a mere nothing, joined in the ladies' conversation as though no oar were in his hands. He was only

sorry when the islet came in sight upon which they were to land.

But even on the islet things went well with him. Miss Arthur herself beckoned her oarsman to the shade which she had selected for her own benefit—(it must be said that he was most obviously hovering near,)—and he was allowed to lie on the grass and look up into her face, and eat and drink—he did not eat much, but he was thirsty—while no one else made any demands upon him, and the gay chatter went on all round unheeding.

After luncheon came a stroll—still by Mary's side. By this time he had a recognised right in her.

Then a paddle all by themselves in their own boat; a halt up a dreamy backwater; where the woodpeckers were rustling, and the waterhens leading forth their broods across the water-lily leaves—more talk, some of it serious—Sir Patrick unfolding curious, locked up treasures of his heart, which no one knew of but himself; Mary sympathetic, interested, touched—for the moment.

"You needn't laugh at him;" she said indignantly, on her return to gay rebukes and

whispered badinage. "I'd a great deal rather have had him than any one else here:" chin in air; "yes, I would. You have your own men," to the girls who had by this time 'caught on' as they said to the 'Miss Arthur' jest. "I dare-say they are nice enough; but anyhow, they have nothing to do with *me*. And I can tell you he's very good company; and—and—I like him very much," defiantly.

Sir Patrick looking wistfully on from the background, was sure that something was being said. Were they trying to take her from him?

He breathed relief however; no such dire catastrophe ensued; and instead, back tripped Miss Arthur with a request. Some of the party were going up to tea at a house whose grounds sloped down towards the water's edge, but she did not know the people, and did not wish to go to the house. Neddy, too, had declared against the expedition. Would Sir Patrick join them in evading it? Would he lend himself to a ruse? The three were to land with the rest, affect to follow them up the woodland path, turn round when sufficiently far behind, and slip back to the boats.

"Then we'll boil our own kettie, and make

our own tea, and it will be such fun," said she.

Oh, poor Sir Patrick !

That hour seemed to rivet in all that had gone before. The presence of a third person was no drawback at this stage, that third being a callow youth to whom the playing of a trick was glee, and to fill whose cup all that was needed was the consciousness that he was sharing the misdemeanour with the prettiest girl of the party.

Further than that, Mary was nothing to him. He had his own Mary, and she was not there,—whereat at first he had sulked, but by this time having forgotten, would start afresh presently with some one else, name as yet unknown. Neddy was never empty-handed long.

He was annoyed with his sisters too ; they would order him about before people. It was they who had projected the raid to the beastly house where he was sure they were not wanted by the beastly people. He was charmed to outwit them.

Accordingly they were the merriest trio imaginable, who with a sense of desperate daring and triumphant diplomacy flew down the bank,

and lost themselves in the green by the river's edge, whence they abode in fullest content till the return of the raiders.

"And we have had the most lovely tea;" said Mary.

"Miss Arthur is a splendid tea-maker;" asserted Sir Patrick.

It was such a little thing to laugh at. He would have laughed himself had he known,—but, as it was, a distinct and audible titter struck upon his ear like a knell. The Misses De Vesci had high spirits, and the day's events had raised them to the pitch of recklessness,—since even Gerty's earlier ill-fortune had been handsomely remedied, and she was now as brimful of merriment as her sister;—wherefore they were alike in a mood to 'scream at nothing' as narrated by Mary Harborough to her uncle.

'Miss Arthur!' Oh, it was a huge joke.

Not to know the universally-known Mary! To have been in all ignorance a whole day in her company, her favoured companion of the hour, the *locum tenens* who would have excited such a swell of jealousy in a score of breasts had they known! It was too ridiculous, too splendid, too screaming!

"Don't tell him for Heaven's sake, don't tell him;" implored they.

All right. Mary had no desire to tell. She had her private complacency in having subjugated a heart off her own bat, so to speak; and albeit unaware, indeed little dreaming of the extent of the havoc wrought, she could not but perceive what all perceived.

It was an understood thing that she and her new friend should return as they came; and out of the range of his tormentors, the latter's spirits revived. He told himself that possibly he had been mistaken, and that the laugh might have meant anything. They were laughing all the time in the other boats. Echoes of mirth floated on every puff of air—not that there were many puffs, for the night was calm as the day had been—still on the water sound carries far, and by the time Maidenhead was reached, conviction was firm that this particular laugh had only been one of many. He held his own stoutly.

And would have continued to hold it, but Fate who had been so kind before, now showed her claws.

"You are looking for Miss Arthur." A gay voice accosted him, as one of his young cousins

strolled up. "Miss Arthur—he—he—he! is over there," indicating the spot.

"I thought she might want her parasol;" murmured the forlorn knight. He was beginning to feel a twinge of forlornness; for Mary, his Mary, had drifted away from him, and others had clustered round her. However, at the moment she looked round.

"Her parasol?" Florence De Vesci ironically regarded it. "She gave it you to hold instead of the shawl?"

He assented. Miss Arthur had been glad to wrap herself against the cooler night breezes on the river, and he had been made the happy proprietor *pro tem.* of the now useless parasol.

"Well, take it to her," said Florence, promptly. "Mary;" advancing towards the group, "here is Sir Patrick clinging to your parasol for dear life. He thinks you may want it," with mischievous significance. "At any rate, that you may like to be near it. Now, don't you go and get out of range of that parasol. Isn't that the idea, Sir Patrick?"

He bowed confusedly. He was not used to being bantered.

"Where is Sir Patrick?" demanded Lady De Vesci, peering hither and thither, eyeglass up, to collect the stragglers. "Is Sir Patrick——"

"Here, with 'Miss Arthur,'" replied her daughter, and now there could be no mistake, he distinctly saw a general smile and glances passing.

"Nonsense;" said her ladyship, crossly. It did not suit her that her own particular guest should be made game of, especially by others with whom she was now out of humour. Flo and Gerty had annoyed her all day, getting altogether beyond her control; while the picnic had, matrimonially, been a failure, as she had at last come to perceive. It had been nothing but folly and flirtation, she indignantly told herself; vowing a bitter vow against river days in future.

"Now, mind we all get into a big saloon together;" continued our hostess, peremptorily. "There are saloon carriages on this train, they say; and there has been too much breaking up into twos and threes already——"

"Not much of threes;" murmured Flo, still mischievous and mirth-loving. "Only one three, Mary"—(Sir Patrick heard her say it,)—"and Neddy doesn't count."

“ ‘Sh! Be quiet.’ ”

The two girls were outside the general circle, close to a motionless figure in grey.

“ ‘Miss Arthur’ has done pretty well to-day, eh?’ ” continued Flo.

A murmured response, inaudible.

But Florence De Vesci’s voice was higher pitched than that of her companion, and carried further.

“ ‘Tell him? Not you. It would spoil all.’ ”

Again an inaudible response.

Then, “ ‘Well, and why not? Why shouldn’t we laugh at him?’ ” cried the heedless Flo. “ ‘He’ll never find out. He’s only up for a week or two, and knows no one in our set. And as for you, it was *you* who set us on,——’ ”

The figure in grey stumbled forward in the darkness, and something fell out of its arms.

It was a white parasol.

CHAPTER VIII

'BOBBY' APPEARS UPON THE SCENE

THAT summer day contained the whole romance of Sir Patrick's life. He never spoke of it; he was relieved that none of the De Vesci family were at home when he called to thank them for his share in the entertainment; and he left London within a week.

Thus he cut himself off, unwittingly, from any chance he might have had of hearing the truth.

And the truth, though it might have done him no solid, substantial good, would have saved him many hours of sadness. It was pathetic to think of the dumb suffering locked within that heart, of which no one knew or dreamed.

Back sped Sir Patrick to his ancestral home and threw himself at once into its interests and concerns, seizing as it were the thread of these

between fierce, trembling fingers, which knotted them fast.

Home was best, he said; that was why he had come back sooner than usual.

And he sent for John Wigram, the factor, the very night of his arrival, instead of waiting until the following day, as was his wont.

He was seen hurrying hither and thither upon the road. A boat was ordered, and he was on the shore waiting impatiently long before the hour himself had named to start. Scarcely had he gone out on to the dark bosom of the loch, ere he must return. They had to land him on a point, and he walked home.

Again he was sighted against the sky-line on the moor, tramping back and forwards, not like one with an end in view.

What in Heaven's name had come to the laird?

After a time however, the keen edge of torment wore off, and there remained only a deepened sense of personal inferiority, and a strengthened conviction that he was not meant for the world, in the bosom of the man who had, as he took it, betrayed himself to its ridicule and contempt.

Nigel, he felt, would never have been so deceived.

Yet again Nigel *had* been deceived; had been caught by the outward semblance of affection, and the charm of a sympathetic sweetness—Selina was still a favourite in many quarters—it really seemed as if truth and honour no longer existed among women, or at any rate among the women of his own class.

He recalled that the De Vescis, whom he had always taken to be nice sort of people, had lent themselves to the plot against him—for it had now assumed the dimensions of a plot—and if they, his own kinsfolk, towards whom his thoughts had always turned complacently, could be tools in the hands of a heartless girl bent on finding food for her own vanity, how could he expect anything better from others?

Lady De Vesci had made him travel down with Mary; entrusted Mary to his care; permitted her to attach him at every point in the day's events—and though her ladyship was certainly innocent as far as the *al fresco* tea-party was concerned, and he now interpreted her annoyance at the railway station to a sense of the jest's having been carried too far, he still felt that she had been a party to it at the beginning.

They all intended him to be subjugated by their beautiful guest, and, aware of his previous impregnability in such quarters, contrived that he was to make sport for them, like Samson for the Philistines.

With dry, burning eyes, Sir Patrick saw it all, and almost felt he could have borne it all, but for four words which, when uttered had fallen like a hammer on his heart; and left an indelible impress there.

"*You* set us on," Florence De Vesci had cried, shrilly. And the only answer was—a laugh.

Time however, as we have said, healed even the smart of that wound, and the hardy Highlander resumed his wonted habits and occupations.

A day, what was a day?

At first it seemed a life-time; but when he had wrung the full measure of its bitterness from every hour, the area shrank. Literally, there had been no time for fancy to range, and a future to be conjured up. The present had been everything—and to this he owed a speedier restoration to his usual quiet cheerfulness than he was aware.

All was over so soon, over with a great crash it is true, but still over decisively and conclusively, that almost before he could feel the ground

whereon he stood, it was cut from under him. One ray from Heaven had streamed athwart his path and vanished—but the path remained what it always had been ; he buckled to, and trod it. By-and-bye he trod much as he had done before.

Selina, however, voted The Puddock *touchy*, on her next visit ; and there was one grand explosion, as we know. She tackled him with avoidance of her house when in Town, and protested that unsociability was growing upon him. She heard he had been to the De Vescis’. And Lady De Vesci might as well have asked them to the river party, for Nigel would have gone if he had known his brother was to be there.

When Sir Patrick had nothing to say about the river party, however, she yawned, and was sure it had been dull—everything the De Vescis did was dull. Besides she couldn’t have gone ; she was dining at Hurlingham, or at some other place ; certainly she couldn’t have gone.

He was silent. He did not see that an answer was required.

This had been said on the first day after Selina’s arrival. On the second, she had, innocently enough, reverted again to the party as to which her grievance was genuine ; for she had bee

dying to go to it, and other invitations had only been accepted when hope was vain,—and on this second recurrence to the subject her brother-in-law had been betrayed into a quick rejoinder: “You might have gone in my place, with pleasure.”

“I daresay. Why on earth did they ask you? So odd of them.”

(“Why indeed?” thought he, bitterly.)

But a grand day's sport on the moor followed, and more than half the bag fell to Sir Patrick's gun; he came home healthily tired, hungry, and jubilant. Also he had had time for a consoling reflection. The De Vescis had told Selina nothing. That, in itself, was a point gained.

The names of the London people who were now submitted to him, as being about to avail themselves of his hospitality, did indeed cause a twinge, as he fancied some of them familiar, and recalled that they had been met at the De Vescis' house,—but his cousins themselves having gone abroad, his worst apprehensions were at rest, and on the whole Selina's list had his approbation.

Little more remains to be said.

New thoughts and emotions, new likings and dislikings, the bustle and stir connected with the annual opening of the guest chambers—anxiety

about the weather, the sport, the various amusements projected, the whole business in short, kept Sir Patrick’s mind in a continual ferment, and when it was over, relief was his predominating emotion. He smoked his pipe and thought of ‘Miss Arthur’ with a gentle sigh.

She was thoughtless—that was all.

And now for the meeting of the pair.

“Who can yon be upon the road?” cogitated Sir Patrick thinking in Scotch as he often did, and deeply interested directly he saw a figure in the distant solitude. “Not the Gill lassie?” after walking on a bit. “Ay, it is, though.” He picked himself up. The Gill lassie was a cheery lassie, he had no objection to meet and have a ‘crack’!

“She’s coming after her shells. Well, there may be some, but I doubt it. I told her a storm would bring them in; but yesterday’s wind was hardly enough. Still, there may be a few, if she knows the right places to look.”

He reflected that he could tell her the places.

“It’s she;” he nodded to himself; for be it remembered, there was no choice, to his mind; either it was Sophy, or some country-side damsel; and clothes and general appearance did not indi-

cate the latter. Mary Harborough, too, though an inch or so taller than Sophy Gill, was not of sufficient height to mark a difference.

She came along briskly. To herself she also was saying, Who is that? naturally not recognising an acquaintance in the kilted figure approaching with easy swing of philabeg, gun over the shoulder, bonnet well down across the brow.

"A gentleman, or a keeper?" queried Mary, keeping to the farther side of the road; whichever it was, it would be easier to pass with the breadth of the way between. "I suppose I must not speak?" Yet not to speak, not even to exchange a salutation, and loneliness for miles on every side? "If he touches his cap, I'll say "Fine day;" decided she.

Then all at once a curious sensation made itself felt. Where and when had she seen that face before?

Sir Patrick's eyes were starting from his head.

But again Time, his ancient ally, stood his friend. The moment was upon him ere he was conscious of more than a dizzy sensation; and a ringing voice hailed him by his name, while yet his ears buzzed.

"Don't you remember me?"

Remember her? Oh, the thrilling sweetness of those tones.

Remember her?

He bared his head. His eyes humbly breathed reproach. His feet stood still.

“Who would have believed we should meet like this?” cried the gay girl, laughing, and well pleased. “Why, Sir Patrick, I think you know me, but——”

“Oh yes, yes;” said he, hurriedly.

“So *this* was where you flew away to, and no one ever saw you again? Or, are you just here on a visit like myself? I only came last night, I never was in this part of the Highlands before.”

“And you came—last night?” He could think of nothing else to say.

“From London to Oban by train. Then my uncle met me in his yacht?”

“Your uncle?” He was still bewildered.

“Don’t you know him? Over there. Losca is his place. That’s where I’m stopping.”

“At Losca? Is Mr. Mercer your uncle?”—light breaking in upon him.

“That’s better; now you know,” nodded she, serenely. “You seem rather dumbfounded, Sir Patrick.” Inwardly she was flattered, conceiving

a tribute to her charms, and ready to remember what had long since slipped into memory's background. "I hope you don't object to my being Mr. Mercer's niece?" with an arch conviction that no neighbour of Mr. Mercer's could mind.

"Indeed, Miss Arthur——"

"Oh, stop," cried she.

He stopped, amazed.

"It was really very silly of us, and rude too," she ran on, a slight confusion visible, "Lady De Vesci scolded us all for it afterwards; and we should have explained, only we never saw you, and it wasn't worth a fuss, but—but my name is not—I mean it's not 'Miss Arthur,' and we couldn't help laughing when you said it."

"Not 'Miss Arthur'?"

"Not at all 'Miss Arthur.' Oh, dear, no. My name is 'Harborough'—but they sound alike,"—she waited for the effect of her words.

The effect however, was ludicrously slight. 'Arthur' or 'Harborough' what mattered it? Sir Patrick saw he had been misled; but a trivial misnomer? He blinked his eyes and looked, it must be owned, stupidly blank.

"So you see it *was* rather funny," resumed the heiress, who had expected a start and an exclama-

tion, and even now could hardly fathom the depths of ignorance which made neither forthcoming. “You had never heard of me, I suppose?” On a sudden she felt enlightened herself.

“Ought I to have heard of you?”

“Why, yes;” frankly.

“And not to have done so was unpardonable?”

“Quite.”

“I understand.”

“But we never supposed that you had not;” pursued the young lady, somewhat disconcerted, “and just for the fun of it, I told the other girls, and they said ‘Oh, don’t tell him’—no,” suddenly she checked herself, “I’m afraid it was I who said it;” a blush rising. “You see London is—is such a horrid place. People who won’t speak to you or look at you if you are a nobody, come fawning round and beg to be allowed to call, and offer you tickets for everything under the sun, if you are—are——”

“A somebody?”

“Yes.”

“And you are a somebody?”

“Of course I am, sir.” The beauty threw up her head. Then laughing outright. “No one ever asked me that question before.”

Sir Patrick quietly smiled. "Miss Harborough," he paused to look her full in the face, "that is right this time? Yes? Miss Harborough, you are, I gather, a reigning sovereign, and I treated you as a simple citizen. But if finding me thus under a misconception—you masqueraded before me as—shall we say a beggar maid?—if, thus disguised, you won my ignorant homage——" his voice shook a little, though he fancied it steady—"was it worth while to laugh——"

"Oh, Sir Patrick—indeed, Sir Patrick—oh, I am so sorry, so very, very sorry if you thought—but indeed you mistook. We were not laughing at you——"

She paused, colouring deeply. Her troubled eyes were on the ground. Sincerity stamped every feature.

"The girls thought it a joke that I should be liked for myself;" with a suspicion of tears in her voice. "Sir Patrick, you don't know, you can't think how cruel girls are sometimes to me. They are for ever hinting—sometimes they even say to my face, that—that the men want my money. I can't answer back. And I never have a chance, because every one knows who I am wherever I go. It's not my own money," she explained; "it's my

uncle's; uncle Jonathan Mercer's. But even he is always talking and thinking about it. He would like me to swagger—oh, what am I saying? I never said this before—never. But you did like me *for myself*, didn't you? And I liked you. And after that day, when I never saw you again, I was afraid you had heard us laughing. The laugh was as much at me as at you. More. It was not very kind, was it? But people in London aren't kind. All they care for is to be amused. When I thought it over, I was—sorry."

"Were you?" His eyes gleamed.

"Yes, indeed. I wished I hadn't let you in for it. I wished I had told you at the first. I wish now——" she paused.

Sir Patrick looked at her with a smile. "*I wish nothing now.*"

Ere they parted, he saw her to the lodge gates of Losca.

Of all this Mary, as we know, made short account when telling the tale to the Mercers. The bare outlines indeed she gave, but there were accompaniments of look and tone which had half pleased, half disconcerted her, and which at any rate were best kept to herself. She would not again expose Sir Patrick to misconception. He

was a nice little man, and should be treated nicely. She might have forgotten all about him—as indeed she had—but now that he had ‘cropped up’ again, why there he was.

“Come along, Sophy;” cried she, in fine spirits. “Come along, before the tide turns. The shore—the shore. We shan’t meet any one down there, at all events;” thinking she had had enough of meetings for one day.

“Oh no, we shan’t meet any one there;” echoed Sophy, but her tone lacked the other’s briskness. “I generally go to meet the boat in the afternoon;” she hinted. “It is the only fun we have, just now.”

Mary however, ran on, unheeding.

“I suppose we shall have to be back for The Puddock’s call;” tried Sophy, next. Anybody’s call was better than the dreary shore, to her mind.

“For what?” said Mary. “Back for what?”

“The Puddock.”

“Who’s ‘The Puddock’?”

“Why Sir Patrick, of course. Didn’t you know? He is always called that—at least he used to be as a boy. An old woman told me.”

“The Puddock!” laughed Mary. Then check-

ing herself. “It’s a shame. It hits him off too well. The Puddock! I wonder who thought of it. It’s cruel”—but she laughed again.

“Isn’t he ugly?” said Sophy.

“I daresay;” indifferently.

“I hate ugly men, don’t you?”

“Hate them? What for?”

“Why, for being ugly,” said Sophy, promptly.

“Gracious me!—what does it matter? And besides, that’s nonsense; you don’t hate my uncle, and he’s not exactly—he’s quite as ugly as Sir Patrick.”

“Oh, I don’t mean old men.”

“You mean men that you are wanted to marry, I suppose,” said Mary, composedly. “Have they been sticking Sir Patrick into you?”

“Ye—ye—yes.”

“Well?”

“Don’t you think it’s too bad?”

“Much too bad. I don’t suppose he is ever thinking of such a thing.”

“Oh, but he is;” eagerly. “At least Mrs. Mercèr thinks he is. And she was quite angry with me about it. She seemed to think I ought to jump at him!”

“And you don’t jump?”

"As if I should," said Sophy, pettishly. "Would you? Girls don't want 'Puddocks' for their husbands."

"I think my uncle and aunt had better let Sir Patrick alone. He has been worried enough among us. And I don't think *you* need bother your head"—("it will take *me* all my time to keep him off—" mentally)—"look here," said Mary, with a sudden peremptoriness, "I didn't come here to have that sort of thing starting at once. Of course if there had been anything real—but you say you don't want him, and I say he doesn't want you. It's not complimentary, but you needn't look so black. You ought to be thankful there are no complications."

"Of course I am, and how can you say I look black? I'm sure, I'm only too glad. But I don't quite see how you——" and Sophy shot a suggestive glance.

"I know men in and out; however, I have said my say, and if you don't believe me, you needn't. Now, I go this way, and you go that;" pointing hither and thither, "and we can meet at those rocks down there."

("She just did that to get rid of me;" quoth Sophy sullenly to herself.)

"What a nuisance it is having that girl here ;" was Mary's comment on her part. "I knew from the first I did not want her ;" further meditated she, "and now I want her less than ever. If only old people would believe that young ones don't always want to go in herds ! I could have been quite happy here with only uncle Jo and aunt Lou,—and Sir Patrick as an outlet now and then. The poor 'Puddock' ! Of course I shan't let him get too far ; but for a trumpery Sophy Gill—a second-rate—a fifth-rate girl, with not even blowsy good looks, to turn up her nose at him ! The idea of such a thing ! I shall have to open her eyes. I shall just *have* to do that. And she can't say it isn't fair, after to-day. Ho ! there's a beauty," and she darted after a shell. Presently in the ardour of the pursuit, Sir Patrick and all about him was forgotten.

It must be remembered that lovers were thick as leaves in Vallombrosa round my heroine. That she saw them come and go, advance and recede, turn tail and resume the charge again, with the serenity born of conviction that no one was wholly disinterested. As she said, she had not a chance. It was wise and prudent to love her, wherefore the love that might have been,

was converted insensibly with a love of inferior quality. Mothers told their sons, and sisters told their brothers that Mary Harborough was delightful—but the sons and the brothers knew why they were so told.

“How do you feel about it?” Lady Harborough once asked her daughter.

“I don’t ‘feel’ at all,” replied Mary. “When I want to marry, I’ll look about and see who would do. And if I can find a fairly respectable duke, or a prince willing to give up his rights of succession——”

“You absurd creature;” fondly.

“Failing these, I should rather like to endow the church. ‘Bishops are cheap at present,’ but an archbishop might make a hole in uncle Jo’s purse. It would be a new departure.”

“Archbishops are invariably married-men,” quoth Lady Harborough, a little bewildered.

“Are Lord Chancellors? One of them would do at a pinch. I should like to have the half of the Great Seal for my own, when a new one was needed. I could make it into an ink-pot.”

“You would like to marry your grandfather, I daresay;” sarcastically.

“Heaven forbid! You tell me my grandfather used to——”

“Figuratively, my dear, figuratively. I only meant a man in point of age, your grandfather. Well, Mary, all this means, I suppose, that you are inclined to remain single at present?”

Mary indicated that it did.

She had one admirer however, as to whom she occasionally wavered. Lord Robert Dashleigh in many respects suited her, and Lord Robert’s wooing suited her very well indeed.

“I am quite ready to marry Mary Harborough, as soon as ever she is ready to marry me;” he told everybody; and of course the saying reached her ear. “If she likes, she can have me at any time,” drawled Bobby.

One day, Lady De Vesci called upon Mary’s mother. “Just a little word alone with you, dear. It is about poor Lord Robert, (not ‘the Dashleigh boy’ on this occasion) does dear Mary know? But of course she knows? He makes no secret of his feelings; and I do think it is so good of him—so honourable—to hold back because, as he tells every one, she ought to do better. Now the question is, Will she do better? He is only a second son, to be sure, but the

second son of a marquis could always be sure of something—some Governorship or appointment at an Embassy—something that Mary would like. And of course there is always the possibility of his succeeding, with his poor brother so delicate, and no family. I am only putting these things forward to *you*, dear ; Mary, of course will judge for herself ; she can see how handsome and charming he is ; I am sure to see him driving his father's coach — and he is so terribly run after — but we must not tell Mary that——”

“I really—don't—know ;” said Lady Harborough, deliberately.

She was speaking the exact truth. She did not know, neither did her daughter. Lord Robert was the smartest and handsomest young man in Town. And though he drawled, and said funny things by way of not saying them ; and generally affected a simplicity of demeanour which was the envy of real fools, there was beneath it all a considerable amount of mother wit. Mary Harborough both liked Bobby and liked to talk to him.

“Tell her I'm here ;” said he. This was after he had made it up with Lady De Vesci anent

the river party; and had confided truly in her, by way of atonement.

"I'm here when I'm wanted. But if she's in no hurry, neither am I. Tell her there's no answer needed. She can have me at any time."

"You know a great deal of that manner of his is put on," alleged his spokeswoman. "And we can all testify that he has never so much as looked at a girl before. Not seriously. Fast? Oh, I don't know. I never heard so. All young men, of course,—but I never heard a word against Lord Robert. Indeed the Dashleighs are highly respectable, as a rule. But now, do tell me," getting somewhat quickly off the debatable land—"do say, there's a dear creature, what *you* think, and how *you* feel? You would have no objection? Nor—nor Mary's uncle?"

At which Jonathan's sister smiled.

Lady De Vesci need not have tried carelessness with her.

And she reported every word to Mary, even to the last query.

Mary however, took it as nothing new. "Of course they want the dibs," said she; "but I don't think Bobby wants them more than the

rest do. I don't know that I could do better than Bobby; and if he lets me alone, we'll see about it."

"All right;" said he, when this was repeated to him.

"Do you think you hadn't better say something?" Lady De Vesci had suggested, at the close of the season. "They are going away now; ought you not to——?"

"Oh, dear no!" said he.

But one day, a fortnight after Mary's arrival at Losca Castle, when two sea-blown nymphs came rollicking up from the island shore, wet with spray and wild with spirits, there was a visitor in the drawing-room, who was not Sir Patrick Kinellan.

"Gracious me, it's Bobby!" cried Mary, throwing a laughing glance up at the window beneath which the two were hurrying to enter by a side door. "Bobby of all people!" She did not add as another girl might have done, "What's brought him here?"

"Who is Bobby?" demanded her companion.
"Is he an a—a——?"

"Oh, yes, an a—a,—that's just what Bobby is. One of them;" lightly. "One of the best, too.

Well done, Bobby!" under her breath. "Glad to see you, Bobby."

"But who is Bobby?" By this time the two were inside.

"Don't you call him 'Bobby.'" Miss Harborough looked round, her chin slightly raised. "He's a friend of mine; but even I only call him 'Lord Robert' to his face. I am not one of those girls who 'Dicky' and 'Algy' the men."

"Is he a lord?" Sophy Gill's eyes grew round.

"Not he. No such luck."

"You said——"

"Never mind. You don't need to bother with him. He'll go off with the boat, I suppose. Looked me up, as he heard I was here. Hollo, Lord Robert!" opening the door. "Saw it was you;" said Mary, shaking hands.

"Oh!" thought Sophy from behind. She had never seen such a man in her life. The tall, slim, easy figure, the clear-cut profile, the pose of the dark, glossy head, and faultless clothes—taken all in all, Lord Robert was a revelation to her.

"So you are at large?" continued the other

young lady, "and I suppose you heard I was stopping here. Aunt Louisa," for Mrs. Mercer was sitting by, struggling with the situation, "has Lord Robert Dashleigh introduced himself? Oh you've had tea," with a burst of reproach, "we thought we were in splendid time."

"We had it early, my dear;" her aunt glanced at the visitor. "They will bring another tea-pot for you."

Mary sat down and took off her hat. She was looking lovely, and might as well have kept on the picturesque green felt which so well became the freshly tinted cheek beneath,—but our beauty never thought of these things. The hat when taken off was found to have pressed down her loose brown hair, pressed it unbecomingly—but no surreptitious fingers strayed that way. There never was a less self-conscious creature.

"It was grand down on the shore," said she, opening out on her lap a handkerchief filled with weeds and shells. "Did you see us, as you passed?" to the visitor. "We were close to the boat. Was that why you came up?"

"Lord Robert is at the inn, my dear."

"Is he? What inn?"

"Why, *the* inn, Mary."

“Do you mean Sandy Maccallum’s? Is he *there*?” significantly.

“It is not a very good inn, I’m afraid;” began her aunt.

“Jolly ba—ad,” said Lord Robert, speaking for the first time. At last he had found an opening.

“Jolly bad, is it?” said Mary, coolly. “You’d better come here. Hadn’t he, aunt?”

“Certainly. Yes, indeed—Mr. Mercer and I—most happy.” Aunt Louisa rose to the occasion; with an irreproachable cook and a host of empty bedrooms, she had no need to hesitate on any materialistic score, while with a ‘lord’ in question, she could answer for Jonathan. She must catch him by himself for a moment, and he could be trusted to enter smiling. “I suppose your luggage—may we send for your luggage?” she now addressed the young man, keeping an eye for her husband’s approach the while.

“Thanks awfully. But really—er——” It is a fact that the sublime Dashleigh for once in his life looked very nearly disconcerted. What had happened was what he had meant to happen, but somehow it was too bare-faced.

“I was going on;” he murmured, feebly.

Miss Harborough shook her shells together, and tied the corners of the handkerchief.

"If you *want* to go on, Lord Robert, you can just *go* on—but if you want to stay, we'll let you stay. You do want? Yes, I thought so; it would have been very rude to me to do anything else, considering what old friends we are."

Lord Robert looked at her. ("She's a dashed sight too cool;" thought he.)

"Well now, let's talk;" continued Mary, tossing her sea bundle about. "Don't let's waste time. Aunt Louisa, you and Sophy will forgive us if we talk shop, won't you? We've got such a lot to say, and I have seen none of my friends for such ages. Oh, Lord Robert," with a rush, "*is* it true about Milly Brancaster and Captain Oaks?"

In a second the two were off at a gallop into a world where none present could follow them.

CHAPTER IX

"WHAT TIME IS YOUR BOAT DUE?"

TWICE Lord Robert looked at his watch while being dressed for dinner. His nimble valet had never known his lordship so fussy before.

But "The middle-classes are always so infernally punctual," muttered he to himself; and in consequence he was ready long before the gong sounded, and Frederick was sent to see if there were any mistake?

Frederick returned serene. "Not for another quarter of an hour, my lord." My lord sat down with a sigh of relief. Quarter of an hour of luxurious solitude!

And here he was safely ensconced, all things propitious. "Knew the middle-classes did themselves well," reflected he, glancing round; "but this is really a cut above what I expected. Jolly

house—good old josser—civil wife—fat girl to play gooseberry (poor Sophy)—and Mary all right.” He hooked with an elegant toe, a chair near, and rested two elegant limbs upon it. “I’ll stay here ;” concluded Bobby, on whose part it was a condescension to stay anywhere.

But, as a fact, he was uncommonly short of cash, and in response to filial application, had been furnished with funds to go and look up Mary Harborough.

At first he had resisted. There was no hurry. Things were not ripe yet. He didn’t know where Mary was.

But a busybody of the family cut this latter ground from under the dawdler’s feet. Miss Harborough was in the very place she ought to be, at her uncle’s—at the millionaire’s—at Losca Castle, in the Isle of Mull,—and what could be better than that he should run her to earth there? Not only would he have an opportunity of bringing matters to a point—(he had protested, but been silenced by cogent argument and powerful authority)—but he could and must ingratiate himself with the redoubtable uncle Jo.

“You know you can be pleasant, if you like ;” quoth Lady Emily, a vehement elder sister, who

held that Bobby was a fool, with a fool's luck. He had chanced to please a girl with a prospective million, and, what was still more wonderful, to be pleased with her. He must not be allowed to ruin all by his "slackness."

"All right—all right—I'll go;" he said, at last. "Anything for a quiet life."

She took, however, the precaution of seeing him off; and also of seeing that he had very little money to go elsewhere. Beneath such supervision Bobby was as nearly sulky as he knew how to be; but having surmounted the terrors of the way, and finding all now going so comfortably, he forgave his tyrant, and even looked round at the writing-table as he thought of her.

He never put pen and ink to paper, that was not his way—but to-morrow he might send a wire. "She means well, poor old girl;" he smiled and yawned. "She could come here for the shooting time;" he further projected, letting fancy range. "Old fellows who do themselves well, don't hang out long; and Mary comes in for it all. But confound it!" his eye wandering to the window, "she wouldn't want to be here in October, would she? It's only to please nunky, surely? For a couple of months, it would do—

nice place and jolly comfortable, but——” at this moment the gong sounded.

Down went the gentleman’s legs, and he stood upright on the instant.

At the same instant the attentive Frederick re-entered, having fully expected to find his master napping, all his new-born energy vanished. “It’s serious this time, is it?” concluded the valet, in consequence.

Still more certain would he have been of its seriousness, had he been present during the evening which followed. Bobby had been thinking, and the outcome of his thoughts was this. “It’s got to be done, or Emily will be in a deuce of a rage. She says she won’t stand between me and the governor any more, if I fail her now. If it hadn’t been for Emily, we might have waited a bit. However, even if we are engaged, there’s no need to hurry about the other thing. She’ll be content with the engagement, I suppose? And Mary is all right. Never saw her looking better. She won’t make a fuss, neither. That’s not her way, any more than mine. So we’ll just get it over quietly; and if Emily knows, she can do all the bother of telling people. After all, it’s—it’s got to be done,” concluded

he, passively, and yawned and stared at the ceiling.

"Jolly good house——" but he had just started on the new vein when the second gong sounded.

Quick as he was to obey its summons however, both host and hostess were down before him. "Knew it," he reflected, complacently. "Knew that sharp's the word with the middle-classes." As he was at Losca to please the middle-classes, and through them his omnipotent sister, he felt really proud of himself. "Shouldn't wonder if I were going to reform;" he smiled as he stood on the hearth-rug.

It was hearth-rug time in the north, and a blazing fire of wood and peat looked cheerful and seasonable, despite the bright, clear weather. The evenings were drawing in, and daylight had departed by dinner-time for the last week or two at Losca.

"You are better off here than you would have been at Sandy Maccallum's, my lord." For the life of him uncle Jo could see no harm in having made such a remark, though he caught his niece's frown as Lord Robert cheerfully acquiesced. Why on earth?—he *was* better off. "Why

should I have left it to him to say so?" demanded he, as he led Mary along.

"It would have been better taste;" replied she.

"Taste? I know nothing about taste. I have taken your fine gentleman in, made him welcome to the best of everything, and mayn't even pass a hospitable remark!"

"Oh well, never mind," said Mary. And as the others followed into the room, she was chatting in her liveliest strain to uncle Jo.

It was naturally a little difficult to make uncle Jo and Bobby chat together. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Mercer knew anything about the young man's world, nor he about theirs. After a few futile attempts, in which the one person present who partially understood both, acted as a species of interpreter, it was plain to all that if things were not to fall flat, rein must be given once more to the Londoners. "We had better do the talking, and let them do the listening;" decided Mary, and all at once she flared up.

"Go it, my girl!" whispered uncle Jo to himself, amazed and enchanted, as high-sounding names and places, reminiscences and tittle-tattle of every sort, suddenly burst forth in one continuous stream, or rather torrent. "Come now,

this is something like!” his large ears lapping in every word. “Sophy never heard anything like this before;” noting with approval her devouring countenance. “Sophy can go home and tell ’em she heard my niece holding her own with the son of a marquis—even if she hasn’t more than *that* to tell——” he broke off that, and rubbed his hands under the table. “Miss Harborough didn’t do badly to run off to old uncle Jo, and let her swain follow her. If I approve—and why shouldn’t I approve? You can’t get everything. There’s only one between him and the title; anyway she’d be one of the family. And he’s a good-looking chap, and smart as you make ’em. Yes, yes; knew what he was about, to come and pay his respects in this quarter. I might have said ‘No’ if I had only heard of it through her ladyship, but a soft-headed old buffer likes to see two young folks happy. Mary shall have him if she wants to——” and he passed the wine cheerily.

“Look here, I know you sing;” said Mary, in the evening. “You sang that funny thing at your people’s concert——”

“And broke down in it! I say, you are cruel,” said Bobby, equably. Then he turned to Mr.

Mercer. "A fellow must do what he's told, sir; and I have a sister who likes to see us make fools of ourselves. She's one of the charitable sort."

"You sang for a charity, eh?" Although Lord Robert's remark might have been taken two ways, Jonathan by luck hit on the speaker's meaning.

"Had to," replied he, shaking his head. "Too much fag to resist. Besides, no sort of use. Never is any use to fight a sister."

"Nor to fight me," said Mary, interposing. "Come along and sing at once," — producing "The Circus Girl."

It was dreadful. Even old Jonathan Mercer knew it was dreadful; and even he wished they would stop, and when they would not stop wished he dared to leave the room.

First of all, a bit of a song was strummed in a fairly promising manner, though regardless of false notes; then a feeble voice, not in the least like Lord Robert's voice, was dimly conjectured to be going to sing—that was as far as it ever got, Lord Robert the while bending very low over the music page, and being encouraged by divers solitary notes of the melody, struck hard;—then the striker would stop to laugh—then go back to

the beginning—then there would again be the strumming, the humming, the few hard notes—and invariably the same stoppage and laughter.

Why in the name of wonder did Mary not sing herself?

But it was plain that Mary, for reasons of her own, was not going to sing. She had a sweet, natural voice, and had charmed her uncle and aunt hitherto; to-night she was deaf to hints, merely rejoining "Oh, we are going to try something else;" every time Mrs. Mercer made a faint suggestion. Mrs. Mercer did not venture to do more; both she and her husband having tacitly agreed to let the young people steer their own boat; and accordingly she even so far did violence to her feelings as to tap with her fan on the table, while Jonathan emitted a bold 'Bravo' that nearly choked him, when piano and voice, for once in unison, actually achieved a boisterous conclusion.

But they alike breathed a sigh of relief when the performers, apparently satisfied, turned to something less aggressive. "Come along, Sophy, we'll have a game. They don't play games;" said Mary, nodding at the elders, (which was untrue, for aunt Louisa played 'Patience' morning, noon,

and night). "We'll play 'Tiddliwinks,'" cried she, producing a box of counters. "Never played 'Tiddliwinks?'" to Bobby, "Do you good to learn, then;"—and as the learning was simple, and Bobby had delicate fingers, he shone more decidedly than at the piano. "What's this?" said uncle Jo, coming to look on.

"A lovely game;" said Mary, hopping on to two or three men in succession.

"Ripping;" said Bobby,—but he missed his stroke. "She left none for me," he explained, looking up at the spectator. "She's simply a dead shot"; regarding her with admiration. 'Tiddliwinks' occupied the remainder of the evening.

"I don't know when you go to bed," said Mr. Mercer, as the ladies departed, "but——"

"Oh, as soon as you please;" said Lord Robert, hastily. His own room with its comforts, his cigar case, French novel, and 'night-cap,' rose before his mind's eye, and his "Sea-air makes one so jolly sleepy," followed accordingly, and was graciously assented to.

"We are early people——"

"Much the best way;" said Bobby, who had never been to bed early in his life.

"Pon my word, this is glorious!" thought he

afresh, as he got into his dressing-gown; "Sandy Mac-stinker's indeed!" — with a thrill of disgust.

"Are they doing you well downstairs, Frederick?" he condescended to inquire in the plenitude of his satisfaction.

Frederick had no fault to find.

"We—er—may be here some little time," quoth his lordship, sipping from a very long tumbler. "S'pose you won't object, eh?"

Frederick smiled.

"Can you amuse yourself?"

"If you please, my lord, shall you want me to-morrow? I mean after your lordship is down for the day? Only for a few hours, my lord. Me and the first footman—he's from my part; it's near where this fam'ly lives in the winter—we had an idea, if we wasn't specially required, of climbing the mountain——"

"Wh—at?" Lord Robert, intensely amused, stopped with the tumbler mid-way to his lips. "Climbing the mountain! *You!*"

"Very partial to mountaineering, always was," said Frederick, gravely. "In Switzerland, with Captain Bellingham as was a climber, he kindly always took me,—never went without me—I have

my alpenstock at home, my lord ;” with modest pride.

“ And you want to climb this Ben Something or other ? ”

“ If you please, my lord.”

“ Now if that doesn’t fetch the old un ! ” reflected Bobby, with a chuckle. “ He wanted to get *me* up the Ben ; but I’ll do my climbing by proxy. I’ll stick to Mary and the shore. Frederick’s a jewel ; ” — and he smoked and sipped, and let the novel lie unopened on his knee. He was almost excited.

Nothing therefore was less expected, more disconcerting, not to say appalling than the first remark which fell from the rosy lips of his mistress directly after her morning greeting.

She came down looking so fresh, so pretty, so gay and charming altogether, that poor Sophy Gill who had been dressing for hours, but who had comparatively nothing to dress on or in—no personal attractions, nor a frock that could compete with a tailor-made coat and skirt of the latest cut—could not but sink still more humbly into the background than she had done the day before. It was hopeless to try for Lord Robert’s notice, he would not even affect to bestow it.

But he was prepared for any attention, within bounds, for the old couple.

It was another still, blue, October day, and Nature at its fairest, appealed even to his jaded instincts.

"Slept jolly well, Frederick;" he had observed, as Frederick prepared his bath. "Hope you slept well, Frederick?"

Frederick thanked his lordship, and had enjoyed an excellent night's repose.

"Still going to climb the mountain?" The master's own resolutions being so very evanescent, it was a matter of real interest to know if those of the night before still held good in the heart of his valorous retainer.

"I believe so, my lord."

"Let me know when you come down," said Lord Robert, kindly. "And—and don't overdo yourself, Frederick. Mountains are—are very high. Don't go higher than you need. And if you haven't a flask——"

"Oh, thank you, my lord, I have a flask; and the housekeeper is a very civil person, and is going to attend to us herself."

"Pon my word, Frederick's in clover," quoth Bobby to himself, as he was left alone.

He had mapped out his own day while dressing, although the mapping, perhaps, did not amount to much. He would do whatever he was told—that was its main outline; whether yachting, driving, or ‘loafing’ pure and simple were the order of the day, he would be as wax in the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Mercer and their lovely niece.

And of course he would tell his host of Frederick’s adventurous energy; that sort of thing always gratifies a host. But he would nip in the bud any evil suggestions to which it might give rise. Indeed, he had already nipped these, and could approach the subject without alarm.

There was another subject, however, to be approached not so easily. Should he or should he not take a step forward on the mission which had brought him thither? He found himself contemplating doing so.

Only a step—because a step once taken could not be retrieved; but still if occasion offered, and all was propitious “I might throw out a feeler,” considered he.

Before he was ready, however, the ‘feeler’ hung in the balance. It was so much easier to tell Lady De Vesci that Mary could have him at any time, and that there was no hurry, than to

pin both her and himself down beneath old Jonathan Mercer's millionarish eye. No getting out of it, once that eye were favourable. "There would be no chance of *his* suggesting to wait;" sighed Bobby. "It's all right, as I tell Emily. I'm quite agreeable; all I ask for is time to breathe."

He had no pride; he did not care in the least who knew or did not know about this or any other of his concerns; he would have consulted Frederick, were he not already conscious of a strong undercurrent propelling him forward, a kind of mute invisible urgency, which could have emanated from no one but the faithful valet. "Frederick's worse than Emily;" he would peevishly assert at times. "I can talk it out with her, but I daren't say a word to him."

And with all this seething in his brain, down stepped Bobby to the breakfast room, conscious only of a vague, pleasurable sensation, and certain only of this, that abundance of leisurely opportunity lay before him.

Alas, poor Bobby! Mary took her place at the breakfast table.

"What time is your boat due?" observed she, carelessly. "Yes, please, some fishballs, uncle.

Of course you can't know exactly ; " returning to Lord Robert across the table. " The boats are so demoralised at this herring season ; I heard about that when I came here ; it means that a boat has to wait at each pier till all the herring barrels are in ; and there may be many, or there may be few ; so that no one can tell how long they will take to be shipped,—but you need not be uneasy, Lord Robert, because we can always get down in time, even if the boat has rounded Ardnamurchan Point before we can see her smoke. What I was thinking of was, that as you probably don't need to think of going before the afternoon,—you don't, do you ? It would do if you got to the mainland by evening ? Well then, we might go somewhere first ? Or, stop ; I have a great idea. My uncle might——"

" Certainly. There's the yacht," said he. " We'll put your friend across with pleasure."

" It would be most awfully good of you if you would ; " said Lord Robert. Not a muscle of his face betrayed him.

" I don't know very much about the distances," proceeded he, in accents of reflective consideration, —(Mary had given him time, by her lengthy opening address ; and besides doing this, she had

kept her uncle busy unlading his dishes, by which means his astonishment was also reined in)—“but I must get there sooner or later”; and he shook his head profoundly. For ‘there’ he would not, if asked, have known what word to substitute.

“I daresay after luncheon would do, then?” Mary, busy with breakfast, could apparently speak with indifference of luncheon—or of ‘after’ it.

“After luncheon would suit me perfectly;” said Lord Robert. “Only,” and he turned to address his host with a studiously deferential air, “only I should be so sorry to be a nuisance. Why should I give you the bother of taking out your yacht? There are plenty of boats. It’s only Fort William I’m going to,” with a desperate dive into memory, and a violent struggle of the imagination. “I can get there by land. I can easily hire. Driving over the moors is so—so healthy. It will be so—so——” (“Oh, you minx!” he was saying to himself.)

He thought he could trust Frederick; Frederick knew everything of course; but though he, as well as his master, had laid his plans, his manners were equally irreproachable.

“Suppose we drive in the morning, then?” said Mary, in clear, brisk, anticipatory tones. “Suppose we show Lord Robert the other side of the island? And what do you say,” addressing her aunt, “to looking in at Kinellan? It is such a romantic old place; and we could excuse our going so early to Sir Patrick, because really it is Lord Robert’s only time.”

(“Owing to you;” thought Lord Robert, indignantly.)

But he continued to eat and drink, and even contrived to throw a species of pleased expectation into the glance he cast towards the head of the table.

Mrs. Mercer poured some tea straight into the tea-tray. “Dear me! I was thinking of something else,” said she. “What—what were you saying, my dear?”

(“What, indeed!” mentally echoed Bobby.)
“I said it plainly enough, aunt.” A slight impatience on the part of the beauty. “I thought you were listening;” severely. “It was about Kinellan. I suggested we should storm Kinellan. Sir Patrick is always asking us——”

“Certainly. But——”

“Oh, never mind ‘buts.’ He won’t.”

"Very well, my dear," tremulously. ("What can she be dreaming of? To go to his very house! To go with the other man! To take him and parade him——") "Yes, yes, Mary. Yes, I think we really—Sir Patrick would understand, as you say. Though we never *have* gone like this——"

"That is no reason why we never should. Shall we order the carriage at eleven?"

"You won't have the yacht?" interposed Jonathan.

"We'll have it later. At three, or half past. I run this show, as you see;" Mary laughed across the table. "I don't always, Lord Robert; but you are *my* guest, and I have got to see you well done by,——"

("You wicked, wicked minx!" thought he.)

"So it's settled that we spend the day in the open air;" the young lady ran on. "Sophy, you can come too. We'll have out the big carriage. And look here," to the abject Bobby, "don't you be late. Eleven means eleven in this house——"

("Middle-classes," commented he, this time with an angry groan.)

—"And of course you must have your little smoke, or your any number of little smokes, first. You can go out on the terrace, and I'll

keep an eye on you from my window. Don't go out of sight. Aunt Lou, I have letters to answer, may I go?"

"Mary, Mary, what is all this about?" cried aunt Lou, behind the door. "Is it his doing; or your doing? Or whose doing? Is it——?"

"My dear aunt, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Lord Robert Dashleigh," said the old lady, sturdily; "of course he came because you were here——"

"And he is going for the same reason."

"You have refused him, Mary?"

"Not at all. He has never asked me."

"Yet you say he is going because——"

"Because I'm here. So he is. Because I have engaged to rid the house of his presence. Because a few more hours of it would—my dear," affectionately, "you and uncle Jonathan are good and kind and simple, you are no match for people like Bobby Dashleigh. I don't want to open your eyes till he's gone; you may as well go on being civil to him for the short remainder of his stay—(for you won't see him again at Losca Castle," in parenthesis)—"but you shall never be able to cast it up to me that if I brought him down upon you, I did not also deliver you from him."

"You—you seemed so glad to see him, Mary?"

"I was glad—a little glad—for a little time. Bobby is nice enough in his own way, and in his own place. But here"—and she looked round, her eyes suddenly lighting up—"here! My dear aunt, I can't tell you what I felt when I woke this morning and remembered he was here."

"Mary!"

"I did, indeed. But not a word to uncle Jo, or Sophy. We must keep it up. Bobby has a nasty edge to his tongue——"

"Oh, my dear, don't speak like that. Rather say we must not fail in hospitality."

"All right;" Mary laughed. "Sounds better, doesn't it? And Bobby's nasty edge is pretty feeble. He does not go out of his way to be malicious; he only spits out little venomous pebbles when they lie right under his tongue. There are many others like him in London."

"London must be a——" Mrs. Mercer checked herself. "You don't give London a very good name, Mary."

"Because London—*my* London—is not a very good place, aunt."

"A place is what you make it, my dear."

Mary shrugged her shoulders.

"Sometimes I think I should like to cut it altogether ;" she began, then hesitated, as though on the brink of saying something more. "Aunt Louisa?" interrogatively.

"Well?" said her aunt.

"Would uncle Jo—what would he say if—has he set his heart on—but," with a sudden change of tone, "I won't bother with it now. First, get rid of Bobby; then we'll see;" oracularly. "One thing at a time;" and she moved off.

With this idea, who so lively and full of spirits presently, as Miss Harborough, "Out on the spree" as she said,—though 'Why, the spree?' mentally demanded the disconsolate young man who sat opposite?

He had been offered the box-seat, Mary herself suggesting "Like to sit up there?"—(Whereat a young footman who wanted to go elsewhere, blessed her in his heart, foreseeing deliverance;)—but Lord Robert had pleaded miserably, "There's no back up there."

He felt spiritless and backless, only fit to crawl inside and loll.

He had not wished to come to Losca; indeed when the scheme was originally propounded, he had stigmatised it as absurd and disagreeable, and

an invention of Lady Emily—(which phrase had its own interpretation for him),—but having drunk the nauseous draught, and found it less unpalatable than it might have been, it took all the life out of him to find he would have done well not to raise the cup to his lips. “Made a mess of it altogether!” he told himself; but even as he thus spoke, a gleam flitted across his brow. It would be something to tell his sister that the mess had been made.

From such perfunctory consolation the dreamer was however somewhat sharply roused by an exclamation from the ladies. They were now within the precincts of Kinellan, and had simultaneously caught sight of its owner, at a bend of the avenue. “Stop;” cried they both; and the next minute Sir Patrick stood by the carriage door.

“We were hoping you might excuse an early call,” began Mrs. Mercer, “but Lord Robert Dashleigh”—Dashleigh bowed, and Sir Patrick responded—“has to leave us this afternoon, and—and——”

“And he can’t go without seeing Kinellan.” Sir Patrick raised his eyes to the new speaker’s face. “We knew you would let us come,” con-

tinued the easy-going voice ; "*I* knew, anyway. My aunt thought it rather cool,——"

"We only want to look round ;" put in the aunt.

"Suppose we all get out ?" said Mary.

A mischievous delight sparkled in her eyes, an incomprehensible vivacity dictated her movements. She threw back the carriage rug and stood upright, looking to be let loose as a bird from its cage ;—she flashed glances from one to another which had in them such covert amusement and significance, that the gravity on every other face deepened,—and she finally alighted on the velvet turf by Sir Patrick's side with a spring that was little short of a flying leap.

Sir Patrick's disregarded hand still remained stretched out.

He felt bewildered and mystified, conscious of something in the air, and unable to divine what it was.

For the past fortnight he had been thinking, breathing, dreaming—Mary : but Mary in the flesh he had only seen a few times.

"Why doesn't that 'Puddock' come over oftener ?" she had cried to Sophy, again and again. "Why doesn't he, I say ?" And in so many words she had desired him to come.

He had smiled and thanked her and complied reservedly. Then he had gone home to silence the great throbs of his heart, and force down by sheer dint of will, its sophistries.

Why, oh why, had this thing come upon him?

Once Mary sang. It was not singing time, not the recognised hour for musical performance,—but Sir Patrick, rising to depart at the close of a formal call, had been thrust back into his seat by well-meaning hands, "For it's simply pelting," cried Jonathan,—and while it pelted, and while the visitor, thus detained, sat still in the dusky twilight, Miss Harborough wandered to the piano.

We have said that she had a sweet voice, and it was moreover one which touched and penetrated. The pure notes fell upon one listener's ear like fountain drops upon a thirsty land.

By little and little he approached her. Ordinary politeness dictated some token of appreciation, some semblance of gratitude; at last he was standing by her side, his broad chest heaving, his fingers trembling as he turned the leaves.

"I do think Mary ought to let that man alone;" said Mrs. Mercer, crossly.

Long ago she had seen her hopes in another

quarter vanish, and thanked her stars that matters had gone no further; while a side issue of the affair afforded her unmitigated satisfaction. All subsequent good behaviour on the part of poor plain Sophy Gill, could never quite obliterate from the mind of her patroness the fact that Sophy hated ugly men.

In consequence, triumph had been great in the first instance when the beautiful Mary openly declared in favour of the despised Sir Patrick.

Mary, however, wiling the heart out of The Puddock's bosom with witching songs and looks, was quite another matter. "She just shan't;" said Mary's aunt, and wended her way with resolute feet pianowards.

But she could do nothing with the two when she got there. Mary told her to sit down, and played the prelude of a fresh melody, while Sir Patrick pulled round a chair for his hostess.

He did not occupy one himself; he returned to stand and absorb.

"Do you like that?" enquired the singer, turning up her face.

If he had been stone, marble, Portland cement—he must have liked it. His dark cheek burned, his eyes glowed.

"This will never do;" Mrs. Mercer beat the floor with her feet. "Sir Patrick?" she said, aloud.

Sir Patrick heard nothing.

"Sir Patrick?"

He started, and turned on her a blank look.

"Let me send you home in a close carriage," cried she, with a happy idea—"Of course he'll say he won't have it, and then he must go," inwardly—"Do, Sir Patrick. It's getting late——"

"Is it?" said he, dreamily.

"Late? Nonsense," said Mary; but after a momentary hesitation, warned perhaps by her aunt's tone, she rose from the music-stool. "There, it is only six o'clock;" said she, as a timepiece rang out the hour.

Sir Patrick, however, understood he had to go, and now indeed was almost glad to go.

He shivered as he hurried home beneath the wreathing mists—but not with cold.—He, cold? He was hot—hot as fire.

And strange sounds were heard that night emanating from the far corner of the vast saloon, where the unused old piano stood.

Only the narrow lid covering the notes was raised, as though surreptitiously.

Two candles lit the corner, with a pale, faint light.

And here Sir Patrick was softly picking out tunes with one finger, like a child; correcting himself by ear, when he made a mistake;—and here he was disturbed presently by his after-dinner coffee; and turned with a start, and muttered something that might have been an apology when he found it at his elbow.

It was a chill, silent night, and the servants were glad when the eerie sounds ceased.

CHAPTER X

"DID HE SAY IT WAS IMPUDENT?"

THIS had happened very shortly before Lord Robert Dashleigh's appearance on the scene, and Sir Patrick had not been met by any of the Losca people since. He had rigidly kept out of their way.

He could not, however, anticipate an invasion so early in the day, and might have deemed his own secluded grounds impregnable at almost any time; wherefore he was now most literally taken at unawares, as one person of the party, at any rate, intended him to be.

She had an idea that he would appear to advantage—and he did. Whatever his private sensations might be, no one would have guessed from Sir Patrick's outward demeanour that he was experiencing anything but the courteous desire of a host to gratify the inclinations of his

guests, and to exhibit for their pleasure and amusement anything he had to show.

He walked first, escorting Mrs. Mercer; Lord Robert, with the young ladies, followed.

They turned aside when within a short distance of the house, and the spacious, old-fashioned gardens, well-stocked, well-cared for, and rich with ruddy-tinted fruit, were duly exhibited and pillaged from. They strolled down broad grass paths between a bright tangle of autumn flowers on either side, and entered the greenhouses, steaming with moist fragrance.

"Sir Patrick," said Mary, running forward, "are we to nip and pick?"

"Anything and everything;" said he, with a smile.

"What a lovely rose!" It was pure white, and hung towards the speaker. She looked from it to its owner, with arch, piquant, provocative interrogation. There was but one thing for him to do.

"Do you hear? We are all to take what we like;" said she, turning to the rest. "Sir Patrick says so. This rose is my beginning, but I must have some more. Lord Robert, don't you want a buttonhole?"

("Just as if we had nothing at Losca!" muttered Mrs. Mercer.)

But Sir Patrick looked placidly on. He was accustomed to having his gardens admired; and presently he led the party through a mossy archway to see a ruined chapel; and again over a rustic bridge and up a steep incline towards the terrace, his favourite resort.

"Isn't it a *dear* old place?" He heard the enthusiastic voice behind, and did not turn his head.

Whereat, Mary again ran on, and joined him. She was forever flitting between the two groups; either appealing to one man or the other.

She would see everything; and show Lord Robert everything.

The fine old hall with its trophies; the panelled corridors with their faded tapestries; the pictures—mostly family portraits; the views from the long deep-set windows.

She took what might have been a proprietary pride in the grey walls now shining in the sunlight, but strong to bear the brunt of the wildest storms. Once she might have been seen looking from them to the gentle face of their lord;

perhaps she was thinking of a curious resemblance between the two.

No one else enjoyed the scene. Mrs. Mercer was irritated with so much display; Lord Robert felt affronted and bored: Sophy, limp and envious; while from time to time, across the proud, noble brow of their host, there flitted a look of pain.

“There, now we’ve seen everything;” cried the saucy girl, at last. “Every single thing; and it’s all beautiful. Now we’ll leave you in peace;” nodding to Sir Patrick:—(Well she knew there would be no peace for him!) “Go back to your owls and your bats, and think how much nicer they are than horrid people like us. Aunt, the carriage. Oh, here it is. Dear me, I’ve dropped my rose:” wheeling round so suddenly as nearly to knock against those behind.

“It is here;” said Sir Patrick, in a low voice.

And he held it out to her, and she took it, but the glib retort on her lips did not find an utterance. With a mere “Thank you” she fastened it somewhat hurriedly once more in her bosom, and he watched in silence.

Mrs. Mercer now prepared to make due acknowledgements.

“I’m sure we are very much obliged to you,”

said she stepping up to her host, feeling that so much ought to be said, despite her own thoughts and reservations. "You have been very kind, and——"

"And patient," again the laughing, heedless voice interposed. "You have borne with us to admiration. Come to me for a character when you want a situation."

"Oh," cried Mary, stepping back as she was about to follow her aunt into the carriage, "I think I'll have my cloak on. Give it me, Sophy. And will you——?" She came close up to Sir Patrick and turned on him the full lustre of two soft, beseeching eyes; then slowly held the cloak towards him.

He drew it round her. As he did so, the lowest, sweetest murmur floated between, "Forgive me." A deep flush mounted to his cheek. . . .

But Bobby found his charmer positively unbearable during the remaining hours of his stay at Losca Castle. Hitherto to be tormented by her had been one of the pensive pleasures of his life, but there was a novel flavour in her present badinage which was simply odious to his palate.

It was no longer good-natured; it stung, and he was sure she meant it to sting.

“’Pon my word, I wouldn’t be paid to live with that girl!” cried he to himself, smarting all over. “And one thing I know, she and Emily would have been at each other like fighting cocks before a month was out. Lucky she has shown her teeth, the vixen! And won’t I tell Emily what she nearly let me in for? It’s the middle-class temper,” he decided, conscious of giving “a nasty one” in return, by the allusion. “They’re a low lot, and dear at the price;” disgust increasing.

“And now I’ve got to go and be sick on his beastly yacht!” For the day had clouded over, and a wind was getting up. “And she’ll be there to grin at me!” concluded the wretched youth, at his lowest ebb.

But he was spared this last straw.

“Take him away;” Mary issued commands to her uncle in as imperious a tone as though he, not she, had saddled them with the incubus. “For goodness sake, uncle Jo, don’t say it is too rough. *You* don’t mind, and we’ll lump *his* feelings. Oh, yes; I know what I am doing. I have given Bobby a trial, and he won’t need another. It has been a little hard on him; but he brought it on himself. He ought never to

have let me see him out of London. To come down here, to put himself into comparison with——" she checked herself and ran on hastily. "Now just cart him off, there's a dear; and let us be done with it. I won't go. Sophy can, if she likes."

"She must. I can't have him by himself;" cried Jonathan, alarmed.

"All right. She's expecting it. Perhaps it will cure her new-born adoration too;" with a grim touch. "Bobby won't look nice at sea. Now, uncle,"—finger upheld—"I've got a headache. Understand?"

But he caught her sleeve as she turned to go.

"One word, Mary. This is the end of it?"

"Pooh! It wasn't big enough to have an end;" contemptuously.

"You couldn't fancy him?" Somewhat crest-fallen.

"That was just what I *could* have done. I could have 'fancied' him, if he had never let me see him except in London ball-rooms, or at polo-matches and race-meetings—he looked lovely at Ascot and Hurlingham, he really did,—and though one's life isn't made up of Ascot and Hurlingham, I might have been foolish enough to—you know

what. But that's over; I've seen Bobby as Bobby is, and he's simply no go. You are disappointed, dear?"—more gently. "And I am sorry, for I wouldn't vex you for the world. Aunt Lou has been very good and kind too. I should have liked to please you both——"

"Never mind; never mind," said he.

"There are better fish than he in the sea, uncle Jo. We'll throw out another net one of these days."

"Aye, aye, Mary."

"So you just get this thing out of the way, and don't worry about him."

"So I will;" said he, lighting his pipe.

Mrs. Mercer, however, was not so phlegmatic.

"I must say I'm surprised at Mary;" she drew her husband aside on his return from accomplishing his mission. "Not that *I* thought much of Lord Robert; he had a silly laugh, and was forever yawning when he went to the window by way of looking out—but he was the same to-day that he was yesterday, when she made quite a work with him—it was 'Lord Robert, do you remember this?' and 'Lord Robert, what did you think of that?'—all their fine London talk, and seeming as pleased as Punch with each other

—so how was the poor man to?—I do think Mary—" struggling between righteous severity and accustomed indulgence, "I do think she did not behave as I should have liked a daughter of mine to behave."

"Your daughter," burst forth Jonathan, for he had been thinking so nearly the same thing himself, that he could not endure to hear it said. "Your daughter, ma'am, and my niece are—would have been—different persons."

"Humph!" said she, drawing herself up. "I suppose she would have been your daughter too? Don't be ridiculous. I'm as fond of Mary as I can be, but I can see her faults; which you never could nor would. That's what has spoilt her."

"Spoilt her!" cried he, reddening.

"Well, she is self-willed, Jonathan. And masterful. And thinks the world was made for her—Oh, you'll say it was——"

"I'll stand by her, anyhow."

"And you don't think she has treated poor Lord Robert badly?"

He did think so, but did not choose to say so.

"It's no business of ours;" he alleged, stoutly. "We don't understand how they manage these things in high life. Mary does; and she made

no more of sending her fine gentleman to the right about than I should of dismissing a ghillie boy. You may trust Mary ; ” uneasily.

Mrs. Mercer coughed behind her hand. Her husband had not seen what went on at Kinellan.

“ There’ll be another there ; ” muttered she, to herself—but she could not bring herself to broach the subject of Sir Patrick. Jonathan had moods ; and, from long experience, she knew that he was now in an unmanageable mood. She knew that he was neither speaking, nor thinking the truth ; that is, he was forcing himself to accept as straightforward dealing that from which his own integrity revolted. A wife must needs pity a husband in such straits.

“ I’ll not give him another pill to swallow ; ” decided she, sacrificing her desire for sympathy. “ Time enough for it, when he has digested this.” Aloud, “ Ahem ! ”

Jonathan regarded her with lowered brows. Was she going to begin it all over again ?

“ You would have a nasty crossing ? ” said the old lady, mildly.

A grunt.

“ Poor Sophy would be frightened ? ”

He faced round, and stood before her.

“Look here, old lady, never mind the crossing, and never mind Sophy. Let’s have this out. I’m not saying I don’t agree with you to a certain extent—only to a certain extent, mind,” emphatically, “about that young man. I wish she hadn’t let it go so far——”

“Oh, Jonathan, that’s all I mean, indeed it is. But when I think of our all sitting round the dinner-table last night, so brisk and comfortable, and Mary looking like a princess”—a relenting gleam relaxed his features—“didn’t she now, in that lovely, shiny, white dress? And such spirits as she was in! When I think of him and her, and the talking and laughing that went on—and in the evening her flattering up the poor fellow, and making him sing when a mouse could have chirped better—I do protest, Jonathan, that singing of his was almost more than flesh and blood could bear, though I did my best to tap on the table for Mary’s sake,——”

“It was terrible;” owned he, candidly.

“But we both thought it was all arranged, didn’t we now?”

“It looked like it. But——”

“Let me finish, Jonathan. And I’ll not say another word against Mary ever after. Just tell

me if you don't in your heart think that—that——”

“What?”

“That poor dear Mary has, for once in her life, behaved foolishly?”

It was such a very mild not to say inadequate sentence, to be delivered so oracularly from the judgment throne, that old Jo laughed long and loud, and the situation was at an end.

And Mary; of what was she thinking, and how was she feeling who seemed to make so little account of the thoughts and feelings of others?

As long as she was within sight or sound of the three pairs of eyes and ears on the watch, it must be admitted that our young lady played the game to admiration. Into their midst she strode with a free and easy step just as the above dialogue came to a close, and Sophy entered by another door; and her:

“Well uncle, landed your cargo? And how did he go off?” was delivered with a *sang froid* that almost made her aunt blush for her.

Even her uncle replied briefly.

“Well, Sophy, how did *you* get on?” demanded she, next.

Apparently Sophy had not ‘got on’ at all.

"You look mighty lugubrious;" quoth the princess, flashing round glances which had in them a curious mingling of scorn and amusement, "but, my dears, believe me there is nothing to be lugubrious about. A little *contretemps* like this!" And she laughed ostentatiously.

Presently she was buried in a book. If no one were disposed for conversation, she could be as quiet as the rest.

When one and another had left the room however, away went the book—our student had not read a word—and up started a petulant figure with a jerk; a window was flung open, and the night-air tore into the room, banging a door, and making havoc of all light articles scattered about. Halfway over the window-sill Mary threw herself.

She wanted to think. But can one think when the blood is in a ferment, and chaos reigns within? When everything is strange, untried, uncertain? It was by no means for the first time that a sense of weary dissatisfaction with her present mode of life had made itself felt within this young girl's bosom, and again and again had this resulted in impressions and resolutions, which had been very real while they lasted.

But they never lasted long; perhaps it was hardly to be expected that they should.

She had no one to whom they could be confided, no one who would have understood or sympathised; while at the same time the strength of character which might have enabled another so situated to stand alone was wanting.

Gradually she had come to perceive this, and in downcast moments, to feel it.

Why was she so weak, so plastic, so terribly impulsive? Those who took her in hand could do just as they liked with her. She could not wear a ribbon or a flower, if any one abused it.

And though her mother and uncle thought she led the girls of her set, she laughed secretly and sometimes bitterly at the idea. *She lead?* She could not lead a fly.

To domineer over adoring parents and guardians requires nothing but self-will, and of that my heroine had abundance—but she was not so blind to take herself at their valuation.

Indeed it annoyed her, when in a mood to be annoyed, that her opinions and decisions should be so much esteemed. She felt defrauded by the very simplicity of her worshippers; by their faith in her.

But for this, she might never have been content with the low level on which she mentally placed herself; and beneath the stimulus of criticism and rebuke might have fought her way upward.

Who had ever held a noble ideal before her eyes? Who had insisted on a worthier standard? Who had shown the ingredients of life in their proper proportions?

Often she felt as though she did not know right from wrong. A struggling sense of duty or of honesty would find the moral atmosphere in which it sought to grow, so adverse, that it dwindled and disappeared, leaving only a vague uneasiness behind.

Then she would mentally charge all but herself with the blight. If she had been allowed to follow her better impulse such and such a thing would never have happened. If she lived anywhere but where she did, among any other people than those who daily surrounded her, she would be a different creature.

After some such ruminations, poor Lady Harborough would have a trying time of it.

Mary's mother was, without reservation, honestly and whole-heartedly of the earth, earthy.

She had no pangs, no qualms. Her shallow nature and untutored mind were content to grovel, and anything but grovelling was incomprehensible. Consequently Mary's outbursts were incomprehensible.

But directly Mary was happy again, all was right; and by-and-by Mary herself grew to think that no good came of querulous dissatisfaction, and idle suppositions, and to stamp these down whenever she felt them rising within; being especially careful, moreover, that no one of her acquaintance should know of or suspect their existence.

She got along as others did, and supposed herself no worse than they. That she should occasionally wish to be better, was in its way a misfortune. It all ended in a "Heigho!"

Since coming to Losca, however, the "Heighos" had been more frequent. Not that she met with much to make them so in her immediate surroundings; neither the elder people themselves nor Sophy, to whom she had at first turned with a vague idea that an unfashionable country girl and a clergyman's daughter to boot, must be meritorious and would probably be religious—none of them in any wise met the case; but there

was another who did. She thought daily, hourly, increasingly of Sir Patrick : The Puddock.

"You are always asking people about that little man ;" said Sophy, once.

"So I am. I like to ask."

"I can't think what you find interesting in him."

"Can't you ?"

"I should have thought," persisted Sophy, "that you, knowing all the people you do, wouldn't have cared to—but there you sat and sat in that poky hole"—the two had just emerged from a crofter's hut,—“and let that old woman go rambling on; and it was nothing but ‘Sir Patrick’—‘Sir Patrick’ all the time! I thought she would never have done.”

"I did not want her to have done. I liked to listen."

"They will say,—do you know what they will say? They are tremendous gossips about here. Uncle Jo heard something about you and Sir Patrick the other day."

"Uncle Jo is always hearing things."

"Oh, you don't mind?" said Sophy surprised. "I thought I would just tell you. Uncle Jo was quite put out about it; and I came in when he

was telling aunt Lou, so he told me ; but he said I was to hold my tongue——”

“ Which you are doing,” sarcastically.

“ Well, I never promised. And of course he doesn’t know about your going to the cottagers, and letting them talk to you ; if he knew that, he might not have thought it so impudent.”

“ Did he say it was impudent ? ” The colour rose in Mary Harborough’s cheek. “ You are sure he said ‘ Impudent ’ ? ” She pressed closer to her companion’s side. “ Impudent ! ” Sophy heard her mutter to herself.

“ Why, of course,” said she, and a slight, irrepressible sneer accompanied the words. “ Sir Patrick is not good enough for *you*, whatever he may be for other people.”

“ Yourself, for instance. But I told you at the first you need not trouble your head with that idea. You seemed relieved ; ” smiling to herself.

“ So I was. *I* didn’t want him. Nasty little ugly fellow——”

But the speaker broke off in a shock of amazement. Mary, whose hand was within her arm, pulled it out with such a sudden vehemence as to almost thrust her away. At the same moment an inarticulate ejaculation burst from her lips.

She grew to dislike, as well as to despise Sophy. It was clear that Sophy was both jealous and mean, capable of wishing still to have the credit of an admirer whom she secretly flouted, and spitefully desirous of cheapening him in the eyes of those who regarded him more favourably.

"She shall never have a chance of speaking like that again." With compressed lips, Sir Patrick's champion vowed the above, and only hoped she would not forget the vow.

Then came the Dashleigh episode, and all that had been slowly simmering before, on a sudden boiled.

Lord Robert's handsome, shallow face, incapable of ever being stirred by a noble emotion, scarcely even by a serious thought, was so much wood in Mary Harborough's eyes.

She wondered how she ever found it attractive, or himself charming and fascinating. A foolish, worthless creature.

And she? Was she not just such another foolish, worthless creature. Ah, but she knew it, and therein lay the difference.

She knew it and clung to her knowledge.

It seemed the one thing clear to her in the struggle which now raged within.

CHAPTER XI

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

“**U**NCLE JONATHAN, I’m going to marry
The Puddock.”

Jonathan who had been slowly descending into a big arm-chair, shot upright again as though fired by electricity.

It is not the altogether unexpected which thus affects us; it is the oft-debated possibility which has been thrust aside again and again, but has ever recurred with quiet persistency and increasing frequency—the vague uneasiness which may be scotched but will not be killed—the creeping dread that must not be spoken about—the folly at which we laugh, if suggested by others. Jonathan Mercer felt as if he had been expecting this moment for years.

“I am;” said the girl, defiantly.

The old man sat down and passed his hand before his eyes. A curious sensation made his veins tingle. And it was not Mary Harborough, his beautiful and idolised Mary who stood before him, but a hard-featured Lancashire woman, who from earliest years had taken the bit between her teeth, and looked the world in the face with that same defiant gesture, and resolute, unflinching eye.

So the old strain was too strong to be altogether eliminated, was it? He felt a kind of pride in the old strain.

‘Uncle Jonathan’ too? Yes. His mother would have said ‘Uncle Jonathan’ just like that.

And she had married the man she chose to marry, despite remonstrances and prognostications.

No one had presumed to go further with Moll, the bold, independent lass, who earned her own living and was beholden to nobody.

Moll’s parents were both alive, but neither they nor she dreamed of such matters as parental authority and filial obedience,—which were well enough for gentlefolks, but had no meaning for the rough and ready workers of a factory town.

Moll's freedom, albeit she was only sixteen years of age, was absolute.

The marriage had turned out badly ; one had almost said, ' of course.'

Jonathan could remember no father ; he had absconded, disgusted with family life, and its ever recurring births and deaths ; but the vision of his young-old mother, worn out, harsh-voiced, and more grimly determined than ever when left alone to ' fend' for her offspring, was clear and distinct after a lapse of fifty years, and started into being anew before his eyes.

He had been wont to experience a secret complacency when reflecting on the apparent softness of nature which had descended to his niece through a parent who seemed to have none of the old virility of blood.

All his other brothers and sisters had dropped into early graves, and he had bestowed on the solitary survivor all the affection of which as a lad he was capable.

Her submissiveness and adaptability suited him ; her marriage pleased him ; the birth of her little girl rivetted her hold upon him.

He had none of his own, and Mary became all in all of her generation.

There was but a minute of silence, yet Jonathan Mercer saw all this ere he raised his head, and pulled himself together for the coming struggle.

He would have need of all his wits, all his diplomacy, all his self-control. His voice was as gentle as a child's.

"I—what did you say, my dear? You—you startled me, Mary."

"Bless you, dear uncle,"—a laugh that was a little forced, "I thought I spoke pretty plainly," continued Mary, sitting down on the edge of his chair, and swinging her foot with assumed nonchalance. "What I said was, 'I'm going to marry The Puddock.' The Puddock, you understand? Otherwise Sir Patrick Kinellan of that ilk; tenth baronet; succeeded his father in 18—."

"You need not go on, my dear."

"You need not speak to me like that, my dear. I'm going to marry, not to murder Sir Pat."

"I am a little taken by surprise, Mary."

"That's it, is it. Poor old uncle." She was touched, and stroked his grey hair affectionately. "I can understand that. I am a little, not to say a good deal taken by surprise myself. Of all people in the world," waxing garrulous and communicative now the ice was broken, "I should

have least expected to have for a husband that dear, good, honest, little 'Puddock.'"

"You intend to go on calling him that?" Jonathan looked at her curiously.

"Yes, indeed. Why not?" laughed she. "I rather like the name; it suits him. Besides," she paused,—“you see, uncle, the very fact of my saying it draws the teeth of other people who say it behind *his* back, and would like to say it to *my* face. If I had solemnly called him 'Sir Patrick' to you just now, you would not have believed I was in earnest.”

He protested.

"You would have thought to yourself 'She does not know what she is doing; she thinks of him as a fine Highland chief; a splendid, romantic figure in a kilt, with a background of crag and heather. But when I say I have made up my mind to take '*The Puddock*' for better for worse, you understand directly that there is no illusion.”

"He is a very good fellow, certainly."

"He's a dear. We shall get on capitally."

"But——" said her uncle, with a rueful look.

"But? Of course there's a 'but'" cried she,

gaily. "What's a life without a 'but'? Fire away, uncle Jo. I'm all prepared for 'buts'; armed to the teeth against them."

"What will your mother say?"

"Hoo!" Tone and look conveyed worlds.

"Well, but Mary," he felt he must progress, "this is all very fine; but you must know, you must feel that we have a right—that this is hardly what we had a claim to expect for you in the way of matrimony."

"Then you had no business to get me down here;" promptly.

Jonathan stared at her. Had Sir Patrick been an all-conquering Adonis, a Paladin of old, even a modern hero crowned with laurels, the charge might have held good,—but poor little Stumpy!

Did the girl mean that she could not see a man without falling in love with him? And she had the flower of English youth at her feet! Scions of the noblest houses gaping after her!

"If you had made up your mind there was to be nothing between us, you certainly took an odd way of preventing it." Perceiving he could find no ready answer, the young lady pursued her advantage. "You painted little Pat's virtues in bold relief, and gave me every chance of seeing if

you had done them justice. Bobby was the finishing touch." And she laughed again.

"Oh, his virtues are all right;" said Jonathan, testily.

"And if *I* don't object to his appearance, it has nothing to do with any one else."

"Certainly appearances do not signify much—although that Sophy creature—you'd hardly believe it" with sudden animation—"but she turned up her nose at Sir Patrick!"

"She'll not do *that* again." Once more it was Moll, the Lancashire factory girl, whose blue eyes sparkled threateningly.

"I told the missus—your aunt," said Jonathan, hastily, "that he was a deal too good for Sophy; but she was all for befriending the poor Gills. She seemed to think the whole family was to hitch on to Sir Patrick."

"So you sent for me to save him?"

He fidgeted in his chair. "I didn't want him run in. I thought it too bad. But I only intended——"

"That he should be taken with me—not I with him?"

"That's about it, Mary." For the life of him he could not but be amused at her shrewdness.

"I thought it would do him no harm just to see you, my girl. You can't help it if you are a bit of a contrast. Your poor old uncle is a fool about you, I daresay, but it seemed to him that the sight of your bonnie face would quiet neighbour Patrick down a bit, and prevent anything else."

"But why should you suppose he would be content with being quieted down? You might surely have been vain enough of me to——"

"So *she* said, your aunt. And then of course we both saw. But anyhow we never thought that you—that there would have been anything on your part."

"Well, there is;" said Mary, growing somewhat impatient of all this. "And I don't think you have shown off so particularly well in the business, my dear, for you to be entitled to much say in it now. You wanted somebody very big for me, and you have only got somebody rather small,—but you'll play me fair with him, won't you?" A slight, a very slight tremor of anxiety was audible in the last words. "For I don't want to go to my Puddock empty-handed;" thought she, practically.

Jonathan, however, reached out a rough, brown

paw, and fixed his eyes earnestly on hers. "I'll play you fair," he said, firmly clenching her hand in his, "It's nowt of a marriage, nowt compared with what it might ha' been—but maybe ye've chosen better than if old Jo had chosen for ye. That flibberti-gibbert——"

"Oh, uncle," she was half laughing, half crying, as she kissed him; "that flibberti-gibbert and you wouldn't have hit it off at all. You don't know how sick you would have got of him. And he would have looked down on you, dear; and on aunt Lou; and been ashamed of you. He would have tried to prevent your ever meeting the people of his world, or even coming into contact with his own family. Think how horrid this would have been for me; for us all." She thought for a moment, and continued, "They make a fuss about my mother now, and almost toady her, because they want this marriage; but directly it had taken place we should have seen a change. She would never have been one of themselves; I doubt if *I* should."

"Good God! Mary!"

"It's true; you see that every day. They take the money, but they never forgive the plebeian blood; and if there are children—I know one

house, uncle Jo, where I have heard the children, yes, indeed have, say things which meant they looked upon their parents as inferiors. *Punch* caricatured this. He made a child say to his mother, 'Aren't you glad you married into *our* family?' Somebody showed me this, and I knew what was meant. It was a hint for me."

"I could not have believed it, Mary."

"I did not tell you as long as I thought I might have to do it, uncle."

Jonathan ruminated. "Might have to make that kind of a match, you mean?"

She nodded assent.

He was silent again. "You would be quite happy with The Puddock?" interrogated he, softly.

"We should get on first-rate; we are the best of friends already."

"Aye, aye."

"And no horrid sneering family!"

"Only Madam What's-her-name. Nigel's wife."

"Oh, *her*! My dear, if I couldn't reduce *her* to order! And he—I mean Sir Pat, but it might stand for Nigel—hates her already."

"And you'd be richer than she, Mary. Of course I should make a handsome settlement upon you,"

"Hey, what's here?" said Mrs. Mercer opening the door in the midst of the embrace which followed. "What's all this about, you two?" good-humouredly.

"Only a little business talk we were having;" said Jonathan, his eyes interrogating, "Am I to tell her or not?"

"Which is not quite finished;" appended Mary, hers intimating a negative. "You shall hear about it presently, aunt; but if you don't mind, I just wanted my uncle to know something about me; because he's my sort of father——"

"And he's got to know it;" said Jonathan. "Go away, wife;" he nodded not unkindly.

She withdrew, wondering.

"It's settled then, I suppose?"—the old man rubbed his chin, and looked thoughtfully in front of him,—“and he may speak as soon as he likes. But, Mary,” hesitating.

"Well?"

"I don't know that you won't have to—has Sir Patrick ever said anything?" demanded he, abruptly.

"Not exactly, uncle."

"You are sure of him, however?"

She smiled.

"I daresay ; and I daresay I know why he has not come forward. 'Miss Arthur,' the stray lassie he met clinging to a fine lady's skirts, and with none of her own as one may say, was one person—Mr. Jonathan Mercer's nearest relation and heiress is another. 'Little Stumpy' as I call him, 'The Puddock' as you call him, is an honourable gentleman. I fancy he feels there is a barrier. It is not every one who would feel this, but I'll take my oath Stumpy does."

"Oh, I don't think so ;" said she, indifferently.

"Why does he not speak, then ?"

She twiddled her fingers.

"Do you tell me he's in love with you, miss ?"
A rising sharpness in his accents.

"Yes, I do ;" she met it boldly.

"And you don't think it's your fortune and position that keeps him back ?"

"Not altogether."

"Then what the devil is it ?" cried Jonathan, losing patience. "There's something you're keeping back from me. I have been open with you, and the least I can look for is that you should be open with me. What is it, I ask ?"
And he thumped his hand upon his knee.

"Uncle, I am keeping nothing back. I came

to you directly I knew myself how I felt and what I meant to do. I told you everything——”

“Why, so I thought, Mary;” more placably.

“But I can’t answer for another; and sometimes I must own Sir Patrick—he—he—I don’t know what to think about him.” She paused.

“Before Lord Robert came, I read him like a book. He was—was very much—very deeply,” blushing, “in love with me: he scarcely could trust himself to speak to me; and though he feared to come, he could not keep away from the house.”

“Aye, aye;” Jonathan winked approval. “That’s the real thing, the genuine article;” quoth he, with a smack of the lips. “Felt that way myself once. Forty years ago, Mary.”

“Do you remember that evening when we were singing in the twilight?”

“When *you* were singing—and the devil was in you that you wouldn’t stop. Poor Little Stumpy—Sir Patrick, I mean—did not know whether he stood on his head or his heels at last.”

“Yet he has never asked me to sing again;” said she, in a low voice. “And uncle, he keeps out of my way now; I am sure he does. The

other day I saw him on the road far ahead. You know how lonely that road is? If you see any one, that one must see you—and he did see me. He could not help it. But he simply disappeared. I don't know where he went, because there was a little hillock between us, but he had gone when I reached the place."

"Then, another day," she went on, with rising spirit, "he was down at the pier—our pier. I thought I might as well go down too—I didn't see why I should not—and he saw me coming, and got into one of the keeper's carts and drove off. Just took off his cap and drove past."

"Very rude of him."

"Oh, not at all rude. He was so quick over it that if I had not known in my heart what he was about, I should have supposed—any one would have supposed he never saw me till after he had started."

"What was it all for?"

"That's what I mean to discover. But I could not set about it without telling you. Because you see, he's not a man to play with, is he? And of course I've had so many of them," proceeded the heiress, simply, "that I

know exactly what they are worth. It was nothing but a try on with some. They thought they might as well have a try for me as not. One little impertinent boy in the Foreign Office began telling me what expectations he had, as if I cared about his wretched little expectations! There is never any pretence, uncle, I assure you. There is no time for that. They simply *go* for me the moment they are introduced,—and they are tumbling over each other in their hurry to be introduced.”

He laughed, not ill-pleased.

“Perhaps I should miss it if they didn’t;” continued she, thoughtfully. “I don’t know what it would feel like to go into a room and not be rushed at. Uncle, how do they all know?” with a new thought.

“Instinct,” said he, succinctly. But with him ‘Instinct’ spelt ‘Lady Harborough.’

“It’s just as well, d’ye see?” continued the millionaire after a pause. “We don’t want any of the common herd; and we mean you should have the pick, your mother and I.”

“So you——?”

“Oh, it got about.”

“But he, Sir Patrick,” said Mary, with

kindling eyes, "that's the best of it, uncle, he to be the one man who knew nothing, and yet—still, I think if even he had rushed it, he might," she stopped to think "he might have gone the way of all flesh;" she laughed a little. "But he has left me alone, and now he is to have his reward. Don't you think he deserves a reward?"

"I'm content, Mary."

The two shook hands.

"I have a letter from your mother, my dear," said Mrs. Mercer, later on the same day. "She wants you back, she says."

"She can't have me, aunt." Mary, who had also a letter in her hand, folded it decisively, and put it back into the envelope.

"It's some ball she wants you for;" hinted the older lady, smiling. "She seems to think you agreed before you came——"

"The stupid Milborough Ball. I thought it was over; I had forgotten all about it."

("Forgotten about a ball!" thought Sophy Gill, "Oh!")

"Mary gets enough of balls and such trash;" said Jonathan, coming to the rescue. "What's a ball to her?"—his glance conveying intimate

acquaintance with poor Sophy's thoughts. "You must just write and say we can't spare her;" he added, to his wife.

"I'm sure if she's willing to stay,"—but Mrs. Mercer looked surprised.

"That's the queer thing, she's not only willing, but means to do it;" chuckled her spokesman. "Means to give up all the grand company and the goings on, and potter on here in this dull house—but wait a bit, what about the return ticket?" Suddenly he bethought himself of a forgotten obstacle. "You took one?" to his niece.

"Dear me, so I did. Tiresome. Well, what's to be done?" She looked from one to the other.

"It won't do to waste it," said Jonathan, with a rich man's frugality, "and I daresay you never thought of taking one for longer than a month?"

"No, indeed; I only meant to stay three weeks."

"It's up then—let me see—when?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Hum!" said Jonathan.

As they were leaving the dinner table, he called his wife back. "Let the other girl have that ticket. She's not wanted here; and to make up, we can have her at the Hall for Christmas, eh?"

I fancy she'll be glad enough to go. She and Mary don't seem very chummy, and we'll be best by ourselves," significantly, "just now."

"What is it about Mary, Jonathan?"

"I'll tell you when Sophy's gone, old lady."

Truth to tell, Sophy was ready enough to go. Luxury had begun to pall, and life in the little racketty, lively, hugger-mugger home, was felt to have attractions never experienced before.

There at least, the eldest daughter of the house was somebody, and would be doubly somebody after her stay at Losca Castle.

She foresaw herself the retailer of endless narrations, the authority on endless debatable points.

Visitors would come to see her. She would scan them and their clothes, as Mrs. Kinellan had scanned the Mercer party.

She would walk about in her new coat and skirt. She would walk with a stick, "as she did in the Highlands." She would wear a bunch of heather in her button hole.

Her own particular friend should hear all about Mary Harborough, and how swagger and smart she was,—also, in direst privacy, how odious and conceited.

When imagination flew to Sir Patrick, however, he was found to be a more complicated subject. Suppose he should end by marrying Miss Harborough, it might be awkward to have claimed him as a rejected admirer. No one in that event would admit the claim; not even her faithful Florrie May. She must hold The Puddock over.

Enough was left, nevertheless, to make a brave show; and it only needed a kind assurance from a somewhat compunctious hostess respecting Christmas festivities, to send the young traveller off in good case, waving her hand to the last.

"And now we are free for our campaign;" whispered a gleeful voice in uncle Jo's ear.

During the two intervening days, stagnation had prevailed, prudence suggesting such a course; and nothing had been heard or seen of their neighbour over the way. But now? "Suppose we drive round by Kinellan this afternoon," suggested our bold young lady.

"And ask him to dinner?" said Jonathan.

"We might. What do you think? But that would mean our going to the house?"

"Not a bit; we may meet him."

"If we do, we can invite him; if not"—a

pause. "No, I think we can hardly go to the house;" said Mary.

She made herself look very smart and pretty however, with a soft, grey hat and a rose-coloured tie—thinking as she tucked the latter in that the Kinellan tartan, albeit in itself not particularly to her taste, would be becoming enough in a small pattern. Sir Patrick wore too large a pattern—for a lady at all events. He had said, however, that tartans could be woven to order, and had named a firm he employed. "I would wear it in all sorts of ways;" considered our English girl, who could not prospectively be Highland enough. "I don't see why I should not have a tartan made on purpose for me;" further ruminated she.

"Attired for conquest?"—whispered uncle Jonathan, as she came down. He thought he had never seen anything so transcendent, and there was something almost pathetic in the pride and triumph in his eyes.

To think that this superb creature was actually going to take for a prince-consort on her throne, a homely, worthy nobody! That she should allow her regal orbs to regard such an one with avour, and reach out her sceptred hand!

Well, well !

At any rate, she would be 'My lady,' and if she chose, might pile up such a mass of masonry on and round Kinellan house, that the present structure would be a mere kernel in its shell.

He supposed they would not care for a new Kinellan ?

A hint of the kind had once caused Little Stumpy's eyes to dart fire, and even Mary had waxed enthusiastic over the walls which had withstood the blasts of centuries. He told himself that he would not interfere.

He would interfere with nothing. His niece's plain-speaking as to the position he would in all probability have held in Lord Robert Dashleigh's family—or in any other family in like sort entered by her — had cut him to the quick, and he had thought over it waking and sleeping ever since. Lord ! What an escape he had had !

And what a sensible girl Mary was. She had looked well round before deciding, and had argued the case in all its bearings. There never was such a girl. "Up Jenkyns," cried he, as she sprang to his side. He was in such spirits he did not know what to do with himself.

But the expedition was a failure in so far as any immediate effect was concerned.

The mail phaeton with its handsome pair of cobs scoured the road round Kinellan Bay from point to point; crawled to let its occupants admire the view at divers points; and finally on its return journey stopped point blank in front of the lodge gates, which had never been entirely out of sight.

"Couldn't ye—ah—make an excuse?" hinted the driver, flicking his whip.

"Oh, I'll get down and see old Katie;" and Mary was down in a moment. "We want some eggs, or something;" laughed she up, and disappeared into the cottage.

She came out again, walking rather slowly, the old woman hobbling after her.

As soon as she had re-ascended to her seat, and they were again on the move, "Sir Patrick is in that boat," murmured she, eyeing a small smack, which lay idly on the water, the day being fine and still; "he went there an hour ago—just when we must have passed."

"Can he have seen us?"

"He can hardly have helped seeing us."

"Poor fellow;" said Jonathan, heartily. The

following day he called himself on the bashful lover.

Sir Patrick was caught, and was all that was pleasant, easy, and friendly. Unfortunately he had business which took him to the mainland that week. He would do himself the honour of calling on the ladies as soon as he returned. The day of his return was uncertain.

“He’s still jockeying us;” quoth Jonathan, with a chuckle.

There were no more drives to the other side of the island, but Miss Harborough now found abundance to amuse her along their own shore, and especially at such times as the daily steam-boat from the south came in.

She was always bright and talkative on re-entering, and had plenty to say about her call at the post-office and the shop, or her most amusing waits upon the pier.

“It is such fun to see the boat come in;” said she. But one day while she was down seeing the fun, Sir Patrick was calling at the castle.

And no one was at home and he was sent away. The young lady’s face was a sight to see, when told this.

How had he eluded her? How and when had

he come back? There was no boat in the night.

Sir Patrick had crossed at the Grass Point, by a ferry-boat.

Not that he knew anything or suspected anything: it was only chance encounters he was guarding against. And every day he hoped to hear that Mr. Mercer's niece had left the island.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

WHY did she not go?

Why did they all not go? The West Coast of Scotland was no longer the place for such as they; especially now that the calm, blue, frosty days of October were past, and wild weather had set in.

Every afternoon closed with an angry, threatening sunset, which lit up the whole sky with its flare.

Then a night of wind would follow, and the morning show strewn branches, tossed up shingle, scattered peat-stacks,—while the boats drawn up for safety out of the tide's reach had a forlorn, uncanny air, intimating rough play in the weird hours of darkness.

Once a terrific storm shook the coasts. It was unexpected, having been preceded by a lull, and

there was anxiety and foreboding in many a home.

The boats kept returning—some of them bottom uppermost.

Sir Patrick scarcely left the shore, lending his strong arm wherever it was wanted, affording the consolation of his presence when nothing else could be done.

Whilst the storm prevailed he did not think so much of Mary. That is to say, he could manage to keep off conscious, consecutive thoughts of Mary. She was always there; he heard her voice through the wild music of the wind and sea, saw her image in the fitful sunlight—but he did not muse and ponder over her.

He had made up his mind, his steady, resolute mind; and active occupation, and much thinking for others helped him. In time he hoped that all would be well.

But whilst she still lingered in the immediate vicinity, it was a harder matter to be firm than it would be once the entire episode were at an end.

He could not always shut his ears, and Miss Harborough's name was for ever coming up unexpectedly. His simple people fancied that it pleased him to hear of the young English lady's

beauty and goodness. She had been over to see one and another, bearing a full purse, and bestowing her uncle's donations with much kindness and good will. Had Sir Patrick not met the bonnie creature? More than once she had just gone, when he arrived upon the scene.

Sir Patrick heard in silence.

His present exertions and the necessity for confining their sphere to his own part of the island where distress was the greatest, served as an excuse for any seeming neglect of neighbourliness; and though, had he chosen, he could have associated various acts of benevolence with the same on Mr. Mercer's part, there was no positive obligation to do so.

"We'll run him to earth yet, however;" thought Jonathan.

He began to grow impatient of the dead-lock. No one might be aware of it beyond himself and his niece, but he felt it to be exasperating all the same. He was not used to being thwarted; and though at first disposed to find the situation exciting and stimulating from its very novelty, as time passed he began to take counsel with himself.

Mary had been very frank with him, and so far

he had returned the frankness; nevertheless, there were limits beyond which no girl could go, yet which did not bind an old man, a near relation, an arbiter of fate.

It ended in this; by hook or by crook, he would see the elusive and impassive Sir Patrick, and force his hand.

Fortune favoured him; the two met point-blank that very afternoon.

"How d'ye do, how d'ye do?" cried Jonathan, cordially. "Glad to see you at last;" planting himself firmly in the other's path. "I thought we had lost sight of each other altogether. You never come our way now." He had thought over this opening sentence a score of times.

"Oh, I know you have been well occupied over here;" continued the old gentleman, in answer to a muttered explanation, "we all know that. The whole country-side rings with your praises. But—let me walk back with you," linking his hand in Sir Patrick's arm; "since you won't come to us, let me come to you. To tell the truth, I was on my way to hunt you out;" proceeded he, confidentially. "Sir Patrick, I'm a plain man, and I don't understand any but plain dealings. Will you excuse a straight-forward question? Have I

or mine, offended you?" A pause. "That is the upshot of this call," continued Mr. Mercer, very well pleased to have got so far, and to see that no way of escape was possible for his prisoner. "There are three of us over there—only three now, my wife, my niece, and myself—and we are *all*"—emphatically—"your very good friends. But of late you have hardly seemed to care to be friends with us. Of course if I am wrong, you have only to tell me so;" hastily.

"You are certainly—wrong,"—but there was a hesitation before the last word which left it doubtful whether another might not have been with more truth substituted.

"I'm glad to hear it—glad to hear it;" responded Jonathan effusively. "One can't always tell, you know. And Mary—young ladies are sensitive creatures."

"Did—did she——?"

"Oh, aye, she did. Yes, I assure you she did. She has quite worried herself over it; though of course I ought not to let that out. I should catch it hot if she knew. She's a poor fatherless girl, Sir Patrick"—(I'll try him with sentiment,)—"and has no one to go to when she's in trouble:"—(He'll say her mother, but that's nonsense.

Besides, she can't get at her mother here)—“so as I stand *in loco parentis*—Mary's all the same as my own to me;—I—I—confound it all, Sir Patrick, you must see, you must know, what I'm driving at. Is there any quarrel between you and my niece?”

“No.”

“Do you feel the same towards her as you did—say a month ago?”

The muscles of Sir Patrick's face grew set and rigid.

“No;” he said again. Then suddenly with a deep gasp for breath, the sweat standing on his brow, “My God, no!”

By common consent the two had slipped asunder, and now stood apart, each breathing fast, on the verge as they alike realised, of a precipice. Sir Patrick's fingers clutched and unclutched the dirk by his side.

“You ask me if I feel as I once did?” exclaimed he hoarsely. “You ask me *that*? Oh, if I did—if I could! That was nothing—comparatively; I admired Miss Harborough, she seemed to me all that was lovely and lovable,—but I was content humbly to pay my homage where all bowed down,——”

“Why ‘content,’ man? Why ‘content’? Miss Harborough is but a woman after all.” (“Golly! he’s all right,” cried Jonathan, inwardly transported,) “You are too modest, my good sir. A bold wooer ——”

“But I am no wooer.”

“You would only like to be one?”—slily.

A spasm passed over Sir Patrick’s brow. He raised his hand and pressed it, dumb.

“Well?” said Jonathan, patiently.

“Mr. Mercer, you have been so plain with me that I—that nothing remains for me than to be equally so with you.”

“Quite right; quite right.”

“I love your niece; I have never loved any other woman; but—I will not ask her to be my wife.”

Jonathan started.

“I will not take advantage of her impulsive youth, her amiability, her ignorance of life. She has shown me, innocently and in all unconsciousness, what she expects of this world, what she cares for in it, and what she means to make of it. Just for a moment, a passing moment, she has imagined that a poor, rough, homely fellow like me—I can scarcely say it, it

seems so strangely presumptuous—could make her happy.” He stopped short, and turned his head aside. Then shook it slowly. . . . “It is a mere illusion.” Another pause. . . . “I bless her for it,—but I will not be blinded by it. . . . She is dreaming, and were I to fulfil her dream, she would wake presently as from a night-mare. . . . We are two different creatures. Were I to strive day and night to make her happy, I could not do so. . . . You, sir, you must *know* I am speaking the truth. What have we in common? Not a thought or purpose,—”

“That would come. Husbands and wives grow together.”

“Do they?” Sir Patrick’s lips compressed. “No,” he said, slowly and bitterly; “I know the end of such marriages.”

“You are thinking of your brother? I grant you his is not a case in point. But you would not compare Mrs. Kinellan—excuse my saying it—to my niece?”

“God forbid I should. My poor brother—but we need not revert to him. Mr. Mercer, I had a friend, a dear friend, who wrote to me not long ago of his engagement in a strain of rapture. He is a serious-minded man like myself, and I was

surprised to find that he had been accepted by a lady who was a leader of the fashionable world. She had taken him for a whim; and when the whim passed, she cast him off; fortunately before the knot was tied. She had mistaken her feelings, she said. That was all; there was nothing more to be said."

Again he looked into the distance, blindly.

"You cannot think—you cannot mean," said Jonathan struggling with a sense of affront, "that Mary—my niece, Miss Harborough," correcting himself "would play any one such a shabby trick? If she gave her word, she'd stick to it—as I should," the sturdy Lancashire blood warming as he spoke.

"But at what a cost," said Sir Patrick, sadly. "Disappointment, discontent, repinings—there is no safety in a man's home, once these fiends creep in; and they point the way to—ruin."

"Good heavens, sir! You—you!—Upon my word, sir! Well, I have done what I could; humbled myself, and got kicked for my pains. You might have said at the first you did not care for the young lady——"

"I worship the very ground she treads upon."

"Queer kind of worship!"—but there was a

relenting gleam. "However, is this your last word?"

Sir Patrick bowed his head.

"Of course it goes no further?" shortly.

"You can trust me, sir."

"It is the strangest thing I ever knew;" burst forth Jonathan, irrepressibly, "and I'm not above owning I can make neither head nor tail of it. However, that's your look out. My niece with nigh upon a million at her back"—(for the life of him he could not resist this)—"need never go a-begging. She has plenty to pick and choose from, I can tell you;" snorting in wrathful dignity.

"I know it. You forget that I have seen——"

"Oh, not *him*," said Jonathan, hastily.

"Perhaps not him, but such as he. He is of her world. She loves her world and shines in it; while I" he paused, and his voice sank till the conclusion of the sentence was almost inaudible—"I am a follower of One who said 'If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'"

"The truth is, you're not religious enough," said uncle Jo, briefly. He had not meant to reveal a syllable of what had passed between

him and Sir Patrick, yet almost every syllable had been wrung from him.

“You may go to the devil in your own way, Stumpy thinks. He won’t have you on his conscience, at any rate. Once or twice I had an idea there was something of this sort in the wind, from the look on his face yon Sacrament Sunday, do you remember? It was before all this was set agoing. You said to me—or I to you—that he had a kind of holy look. And I’m blessed if I didn’t think it rather fine of him to be sitting there among all his people, so solemn and smart as if for a great occasion. I felt almost ashamed when we all sneaked out of the kirk before the Bread and Wine went round. He laid that up in his mind against us, too, I don’t doubt; we’re not his sort, Mary; you’d need belong to the ‘ower guid’ my lass, before ye could mate with the godly Puddock.”

“For shame!” cried she, with tears in her eyes.

“Anyhow he’s dead set against you, and you must look elsewhere for a husband.”

“Must I, indeed?” quoth she, to herself.

He was ten times more to her than he had ever been before.

To think that he should be so stern, so stead-

fast ! Loving her as he did, and owned to doing, was it not grand to have such power of renunciation, such contempt for self-torture ?

What were the words he had used ?

“ I worship the very ground she treads upon.” She had made her uncle repeat them twice.

And he had flushed and trembled as he spoke ? “ There was no mistaking that the poor fanatic was in earnest,” Jonathan had assured her ; “ mad he might be, but there was no humbug in his madness.” His voice shook at your very name ;” said the old man ; “ it seemed sometimes as if he could hardly get it out. But he takes it for granted that you are a weather-cock, a mere flimsy fashion-plate.”

“ I am not—I am not ;” cried she, passionately.

“ You do talk like it, Mary.”

“ Because I know no other talk.”

“ All that slang,——”

“ I know, I hate it. It’s vulgar—not what *you* would call vulgar, because the smartest people—it’s at their houses you hear the most. But when I’m away from our set, I do notice that it doesn’t sound right. Oh, it has been my own fault, my own fault ;” sighed she, seeing no comfort was to be got from him,

"One thing I must do Stumpy the justice to say," blurted out Jonathan, presently. "He never gave your money-bags a thought."

"I told you so."

"Well, but I had my own ideas; stop a bit, you don't understand. I had it in my head that they held him back—not that they drew him on. If I had not thought *that* I should never have gone the length I did. Apparently they were of no weight either way! I wish now I had let well alone."

She wished so too.

"I suppose it is all over;" she said, quietly. "And the only thing I can do now is to try not to regret ever having known Sir Patrick Kinellan. Certainly he has done for me what no one else ever tried to do—he has shown me myself. It has been a little hard to bear. Perhaps he has been a little cruel, a little harsh in his judgments; but how could he be expected to know better? He could only judge by what he saw. And he has never seen the real Mary. But after all, uncle," she wiped away a few tears, "the picture, if not a perfect likeness, was near enough the truth to hurt. I *have* lived a life of pleasure. I *have* swung with the tide, and let it carry me

wherever it would. Sir Patrick's idea of me is a true one, except," she paused, "except that he does not know all. He does not know what might have made him a little less—hard. Uncle, I have often had bad moments—moments when it all seemed unutterably mean and poor, and myself nothing but a worthless, useless creature. Only these never lasted. Shall I tell you why? It is because I am so very weak, dear uncle." She took his hand and stroked it fondly. "You think far too highly of your poor Mary. You say to yourself 'This is a fine girl. She knows what she is about. She leads us all.' And you and my mother are so kind and good, you let yourselves be led, and you give in to me, and spoil me, as all the rest do."

"I daresay, I daresay." (Who wouldn't? thought he to himself.)

"But what I want is some one who would *not* give in. Who would see my faults and help to cure me of them, and yet—love me. Some one whom I should have to obey—you don't think so?" quickly, for she had caught an almost imperceptible shake of the head. "Oh, but you don't know me either, uncle; you don't know the real Mary; indeed, indeed you do not. If I

could respect and love a man, I would surrender my will—I should be glad to do it, proud to do it. Of course it would have to be some one strong enough”—again she paused, and hesitated. “I thought I had found such an one,” she smiled a little bitterly, “but it appears I am mistaken.”

“Don’t hanker after him, Mary. Don’t, I can’t bear it.” She his pride, his darling, to have been thwarted, slighted, rejected by a Puddock! He said the words aloud in his angry heart. His features twitched as he looked at her now.

She returned the look calmly. “It is all right, dear uncle. Old maids are often the happiest.”

“Fiddlesticks—old maids!” He fumed and muttered incoherently; then raised his head to exclaim:—“What I can’t get over is, that after you—*you* who might have *anybody*, had lowered yourself to think you could put up with him——”

“He couldn’t put up with me.” The fragment of a smile re-appeared. “It does seem comical, does it not?”

“It’s—it’s incredible.”

She let it pass.

Later on in the day, they saw her looking out

trains and writing busily. "She's going;" they told each other, divining what this meant; but neither one nor the other durst inquire; and it was not till her arrangements were complete that she came in to announce them.

Her uncle and aunt were together, and simultaneously experienced a thrill of curiosity, not unmingled with apprehension.

They knew what she was going to say; but how would she say it?

She held up her head and spoke cheerfully. "I have written for rooms at Oban for to-morrow night, uncle Jo. It appears that the Skye steamer will not touch here till late in the afternoon, or possibly the evening; and you cannot send me off in the yacht because of that tiresome boiler. I went down to see Captain Binks, and he tells me he cannot get it put to rights under a week."

"And you can't wait a week?"

"No, dear;" quietly.

No more was said on either part, and orders were given and preparations made with a certain avoidance of each other by all concerned, which seemed due to a tacit understanding.

"I only wish it were not such a wild, rough

day, however," said Mrs. Mercer, as the November morning broke with driving clouds, and a heavy sea running. A blast struck the windows as she spoke, followed by a fierce spatter of rain. "You are a good traveller, Mary, I daresay; and luckily we have a pier, so that you do not need to go out into the middle of the Sound in a ferry-boat, as they tell me used to be the way here,—but I am afraid you will have a disagreeable crossing."

"Ay, it will be pitch and toss off Lismore I doubt not;" appended Jonathan, returning from a look out. "But after all, in a good-sized, steady-going boat like the *Clansman*, you have no need to mind. You will be better off in her than you would have been in the *Bravura*; she would have tipped about a good deal in weather like this."

"I don't mind the weather;" said Mary.

She had been up once or twice in the night, looking anxiously over the sea, in terror lest a storm might really be rising which would of necessity delay her departure. Anything rather than that, she thought.

For her own part, she would go, go if a hurricane blew and waterspouts were bursting round,

—but it would hardly be possible to maintain this resolution should her uncle and aunt be opposed to it.

It was therefore with relief that she noted the subsidence of the elements with the dawn, and the mere prospect of a few hours' unpleasantness was nothing.

To be on the move, to get away from this place, to be freed from the necessity of keeping up appearances with those aware of her humiliation—for even her aunt had obviously now a glimmering of the truth—that with my ill-starred heroine, was now all in all.

She strove to make her exit with dignity; bustled hither and thither collecting her goods; and must needs superintend their bestowal in trunks and dress-baskets—a thing she had never done before.

Sarah, wondering and aggrieved, fretted too by directions and counter-directions, wished her young mistress anywhere else. Had such supervision ever been previously required? And was it likely that she, Sarah, knowing what she had brought, and that all which came must go back again, could need be told of this, and reminded of that, till she was at her wits' end?

Mary was making of it all an excuse for keeping as much as possible within her own rooms. If followed thither by a solicitous hostess, she was still within earshot of Sarah.

Now and then the latter shuddered as the wind moaned and whistled without.

It was indeed good news to be going; she was glad from her heart to be leaving this eerie spot behind; but she would thankfully have waited for a better day and a more decent and leisurely departure, had she been consulted.

She was kept packing like ten furies, however.

"We may not have to go till night, but we must be ready by four o'clock;" said Miss Harborough, decidedly. "Indeed, we should really be ready sooner, as the luggage has to be down at the pier at four—or soon after. Don't mind about that thing, Sarah;" — it was her best dinner-dress, and she had worn it one evening—she hated to look at it now.

"Get it in, somehow;" she cried, impatient of the smooth foldings, and silver-paper wrappings. "And get on—do get on," handing another article.

It was of an inappropriate nature, and Sarah rebelled,

"This, then?" said the young lady, holding out a rough driving coat.

"You will want that, miss, on the boat."

"Well, this?" It was a plaid, also laid aside for travelling use.

"If you would leave it to me, miss;" the poor woman was in despair, "you are just tiring yourself out, miss. I can manage, if you would go downstairs——" she hinted at last.

The afternoon wore on.

"I am glad you can have a cup of tea comfortably before you go, my dear."

Mrs. Mercer had with her own hands piled fresh logs on the great wood fire, striving thus to counteract the gloom of the outer world, where the light was waning earlier than usual beneath a heavily clouded sky; and she assumed a studiously cheerful tone in thus addressing her niece, who came down to the drawing-room fully equipped as the clock struck four.

"There is no hurry, you will be glad to hear;" proceeded the old lady, "Jenkynton has just come back from the pier, and says that the boat is not expected for an hour or two yet. She must be late to-day, they say; and more likely than not it will be dark before she comes. In-

deed it is getting dark now. Mary, I suppose," hesitating, "if it should be *very* late, my dear, and—and dark—would you not care to put off——"

"Oh no, my dear aunt. It is very kind of you to wish it, but I never put off things. Besides there is really nothing to mind, you know. It is not even raining now."

Her aunt said no more, and the two sat down.

"Where is uncle Jo?" demanded Mary.

"In his room. He will see you on board, of course. But when I asked if he would not come here and sit with us a little, he turned me out. He feels your going, my dear."

"Will you excuse me for a minute, aunt? No, I won't have any more, thank you." She had drunk feverishly, but eaten nothing. "I may have to dine here, you know;" with a poor attempt at jocularity; "you may not have done with me yet; and at any rate, if I am hungry I can get something to eat on board the boat. But I——" rising and nervously pushing back the low seat on which she had been sitting—"I think I will go to my uncle. I should like to—to see him. I will come back again;" and she hurried from the room.

Her mind was full of something of which she wished to disburden it before starting, before quitting for ever a painful and hateful subject—and the opportunity for doing so was unexpected. She had reckoned on the drive down to the pier. It seemed now, however, as if her full heart must discharge itself.

“If you please, miss——” it was Jenkynson in the corridor. Perhaps with some message from the pier-master, some query about her luggage?

She anticipated him. “It is all gone, Jenkynson: went about half-an-hour ago.”

“Yes, miss. I passed the cart on my way up, and the boat is not expected for some time yet, miss. They think she may be some hours late. It is Sir Patrick Kinellan who has called to see you, miss.”

Sir Patrick Kinellan! She stood still, her head turning round, the calm matter-of-fact words ringing in her ears.

“Who—who did you say?” she murmured, feebly. Afterwards she hoped he construed it with ‘peevishly,’ as one annoyed at a visitor at such a moment.

“Sir Patrick Kinellan, miss. I showed him

into the little room;" making way as if for her to pass towards the indicated apartment.

"But my aunt is in the drawing-room."

"Sir Patrick asked for you, miss."

"For me? Oh? To say 'Good-bye,' I suppose;" still struggling to preserve appearances. "Did you tell Sir Patrick I was just leaving, Jenkynson? Or—or did he seem to know?"

"I said so, miss. But I think he knew. He said he would not detain you. I saw him on the pier, too;" hinted Jenkynson.

"He would learn there that there was time, of course."

"Yes, miss."

And now, she must go — she *must* go. A momentary respite had been afforded by the above, and time sufficient had been gained to allow of her entering in a customary manner, and taking it for granted that a polite parting call—but surely it was unnecessary on Jenkynson's part to induct a visitor even if he had specially named herself as the person to whom the civility was to be paid, into a small distant chamber, instead of straight into her presence? Did Jenkynson——?

She must not stop to think.

Into the room she stepped with a forced gesture of easy welcome.

He was between her and the light, waiting, with his face turned towards the door. In both hands he held his cap before him. Something in the attitude reminded her of a beggar.

“So kind to come and wish me ‘Good-bye ;’” cried she, gaily, and held out her hand.

He did not take it.

He stood as he was, and merely bent his head : bent it and kept it bowed.

“Did you not come for that?” she smiled. “I am going, you know ; going this very minute—that is the very minute the *Clansman* comes in sight. You came to——”

“I came to ask for this hand.”

He looked towards it ; it fell by her side.

“Miss Harborough, you may well turn from me”—for she had half turned away ; “I can scarcely hope that you will have the forbearance to hear me ; but at least I shall have said it, and God knows I mean it.” He gazed at her with burning eyes, his voice shook with agitation.

“Am I allowed to speak ?”

A slight movement ; he took it for assent.

“Your uncle may have told you—that some-

thing—passed between us—lately?” he murmured, brokenly. “He had read my heart—as all must have done—who could help it? And in the goodness of his, he thought to make my hard way more easy. He——”

“I know; I know.”

“Miss Harborough, I have led a life of solitude; I have had through all life to lean upon my own arm; and walk my own path. Can it be wondered at if I sometimes blunder? The other day I—blundered. Call it by no harsher name, I implore you, it wrung my very heart to bleeding. But I thought—I thought——”

“I understand.”

“Can you forgive?”

“I don’t know.”

Suddenly she burst out. “But why should you change like this? Why are you different to-day from that day? Why should you suppose now that I could make you happy, if you did not then?”

“I am not thinking of being made happy. I love you so deeply, so truly, so unalterably;” again his voice shook and faltered, “that it no longer seems to matter to me whether I am happy or not. All that matters is, if I can be of

any use to you. I am yours to do with what you please. Take me now; cast me off to-morrow——”

She looked at him mutely.

“Dear lady,” he said, returning the look with a calm and steadfast gaze, “that I should have been so madly selfish as to think of my own ease and peace at such a time seems almost incredible to me now. When I spoke to your uncle, it is true that I said—and believed when saying so I spoke the truth—that I was but guarding against a fearful mistake on your part, which would for ever blight your life as it would mine. But I know now that I was in reality thinking, shame upon me! more of myself than of you. You would have found *me* faithful——”

—“While I should have been faithless.”

“Be faithless now, if you will, I am at your feet.” Again he bowed low before her. “My heart is yours; has been so from the first; will be so always. But you shall be free. Whatever you command, I will obey. If I can be of any use to you,” he repeated, softly, “I am more than honoured, I am content.”

“Still you do not believe in me, Sir Patrick?”

“I believe in your great goodness, and in the sincerity of your intentions.”

"My present intentions ;" significantly.

"You are very young. I fancy your nature is impulsive ; and forgive me if I suggest that it is possible you have never given much time to reflection."

"So you expect me to throw you off ? Or if not that, to repent later of my present caprice ?"

A long pause ensued, then "I do" said he, in a low voice.

"And yet——?"

"And yet I ask you, I beg you from the depths of my inmost heart, I entreat you to take me for your affianced husband."

"Good Heavens, Sir Patrick," she started aside,—“was ever woman so entreated ? Do you think I would—or could ?”

"That is what I came to learn."

"But it is unheard of."

"Oh, no ;" he shook his head gently. "Not unheard of. What true knight would not gladly lay down his life for her he loves ? And may I not offer something, some poor offering, only too grateful if it be accepted ?"

"Thinking of me as you do, you can't love me."

No reply.

"I say you can't," she cried, passionately, "but if you knew me better, I think—oh, I know you would not be so unjust and cruel. Sir Patrick, indeed, indeed, I am not what I appear. The world thinks of me as a giddy girl, caring for nothing but the gratification of her own vanity and pleasure. Those about me are ambitious for my advancement, and I have let them think—no, I will speak the truth—I have too often thought with them, that to be what is commonly called 'a great lady' was the most desirable thing imaginable for me. But left to myself, I do *not* think so. I have a better self that hates and scorns the idea. I want to be—good;" tears streamed down her face; "I want to learn what goodness is, and practise it. I want to have another standard from that I see raised about me. *You* hold it. You are a religious man. I have watched you, and know that there is something in your life which makes you different from the men who come round me. And I thought—I thought——" she struggled with her tears, "that you would help me." She moved towards him, sobbing as she came.

Another lover would have caught her in his arms, but Sir Patrick stepped back a pace, then

slowly and with an air of the deepest humility bent low, and taking her hand in both of his, kissed it. The light of a new world seemed breaking in upon him.

“Don’t speak, don’t speak, till I can speak,” whispered she; “it is not—not altogether as you think. I said, Did you suppose I could accept you on your terms? I can’t. I should despise myself if I could. But do not think,” recovering herself somewhat, she smiled upon him tenderly, whilst yet the tears welled from her eyes, “that I can afford for this to let go the only lover who has ever loved me for myself and despite myself? Sir Patrick, let this be our compact. I go from here to-night, and we are not to meet, nor to write, nor to try and influence each other in any way for a year’s time——”

—“A whole year!” Her heart leaped at his tone. She laid her other hand in his.

“A whole long year.” . . . They were now gazing into each other’s eyes. “I shall go my way and you yours. . . . You know me better now, I think?” softly, and leaning towards him, “and perhaps you will begin to trust me from to-night? At the end of a year——”

“Summon me any time—*any* time,” fervently.

“I shall not summon you before the year is out. You have got to prove me, and I to prove myself. *I* am not afraid; but I daresay you are——”

“No, no. Not now.”

“If doubts come into your mind, try to thrust them out. Say ‘She is a poor creature, but she loves me——’”

“May I? May I indeed say that?” He hung upon her lips.

—“And commit her to the care of One who sees not as men see, who knows the heart.” She was sobbing now upon his breast.

“Day and night I will so commit you—Mary.”

“It is arranged then,” said she, lifting her head at last; “and—hush! they are at the door now. The boat? It must be the boat. One moment, dear Sir Patrick, one promise you must make me before we part. When the year is out, if I send from wherever I am to wherever you are, this little word ‘Come,’ will you come?”

“So help me God,” he said, “I will.”

The year is almost expired, and the other day

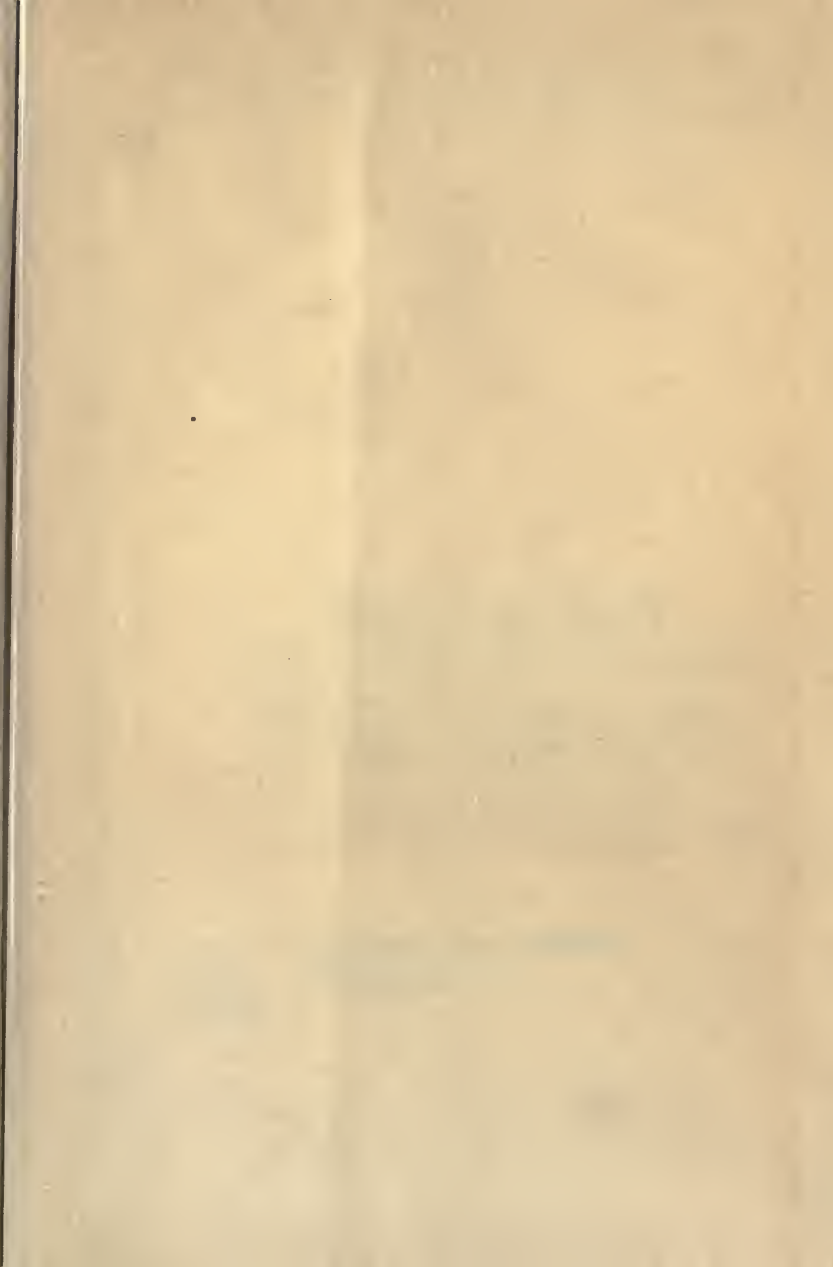
when I chanced to be in at Redfern's where smart winter costumes are on view, who should enter to have her new tweed suit fitted on but the beautiful heiress, Miss Mary Harborough. She was going to Scotland, she said, within a week, and positively must have her suit. I thought I had never seen a lovelier face, nor one more radiantly happy. As I knew her slightly I stepped forward to enquire after uncle Jo?

Her uncle was in the best of health, she said, and at Losca Castle still. It was late in the year, but—and oh, how she smiled!—he was detained there. She was about to join him.

Lady Harborough?

Lady Harborough was also well, and also proceeding to the Highlands—presently.

Then I knew that what rumour had whispered was for once the truth, and that the tartan plaid across the broad breast of as honest and true-hearted a little fellow as ever lived, covered a heart which not many days thereafter would be the proudest and most joyful heart in all the length and breadth of bonnie Scotland.



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